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**Set design, spatial configurations and the architectonics of 1930s  
French poetic realist cinema**

**Benjamin Edward McCann**

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the  
requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts  
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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to demonstrate that 1930s French poetic realist cinema is characterised by a highly readable set design. It is a decor imbued with meaning - not a silent shell, standing detached from the action but rather the amplifier of narrative concerns. The thesis develops the claim that the decor is freighted with a powerful dramaturgical and symbolic charge, whereby the figural dimensions of everyday decor fragments anthropomorphise into powerful signifying elements. Stylised studio-bound spatial configurations define the film's visual ambience, enhance its emotional dimensions and function as amplifier of the story.

In order to identify the importance of decor as an interpretative matrix of poetic realism, I shall show how poetic realist decor is the confluence of orthodox architectural practice, personal temperament and an appeal to popular memory. By examining the design practices of individual set designers, the thesis will provide evidence for the capacity for architecture to act as resonator of mental impact. The study will show how the set designer emotionalises architecture, investing it with a strong spatial, visual and performative presence.

Although other critical studies of poetic realism have recognised the distinctiveness of the set design, they have not fully examined the architectural specificity of the films. The thesis contends that the director-designer collaboration sought to distil a visual concept from the thematic and psychological concerns of the screenplay. This interface between story and style will be demonstrated by a move from the general to the specific, looking at depictions of the city, a rhythmic recurrence of decor fragments and the micro-dimensions of the object. Ultimately, the set design and architectonics of poetic realism are performative in the sense that they can represent a discourse of their own, producing an engaging dialogue with more traditional modes of film performance.

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Particular thanks go to William Baltyn, Craig Morrow and Andrew Watts for their help, and my family for their patience, support and understanding. Finally, I acknowledge a lasting debt to Rebecca, without whom I could not have finished.



## Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original except where indicated by special reference in the text and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree.

Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University of Bristol.

The dissertation has not been presented to any other University for examination either in the United Kingdom or overseas.

SIGNED:



DATE: 17th October 2002

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## Introduction

On 11 March 1939, during pre-production for *Gone With The Wind*, producer David O. Selznick sent the following internal memorandum to production designer William Cameron Menzies, art director Lyle Wheeler and set designer Edward Boyle:

There has been a great deal of comment recently about the difference between the outstanding foreign pictures, particularly the French pictures, and the American pictures, in that the better foreign pictures seem to capture a quality of reality in the photography, sets, and costumes that is lacking even in the best American pictures. I personally feel that this criticism is a justifiable one.

I feel that our sets always look exactly what they are - sets that have been put up a few hours before, instead of seeming in their ageing and in their dressing to be rooms that have existed for some time and have been lived in.<sup>1</sup>

Selznick's aspirations to create more 'lived in' sets may seem a little inconsistent, given that the dominant production output while he was head of MGM and Selznick International was characterised by an intensity of sheen and gloss which ironically corroborated this appraisal of the inherent sameness and anonymity of Hollywood decor. Nevertheless, the memorandum is a trenchant reminder of the attention French cinema has always placed on plastic values and of its preference for rendering atmosphere to telling a story neatly. It is also an important attestation to the wide-reaching effects that French set design had on the development of not just its own cinematic identity, but also on the standards of production and approach to set design in other national cinemas. Hollywood decor was uniform, designed specifically to reinforce the American film-goer's idea of fiction as a state inhabited by glamorous people capable of negotiating crises in ninety minutes and bringing them to logical and happy conclusions.

On the other hand, by the end of the 1930s, French cinematic decor was the

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<sup>1</sup> In *Memo from David O. Selznick*, ed. by Rudy Behlmer (New York: Modern Library, 2000), p.217.

benchmark against which all other national cinemas were measured. The ‘great deal of comment’ Selznick refers to explicitly consecrates French poetic realist set design as *the* design scheme the rest of the world was aspiring to emulate. By 1939, *Le Quai des brumes* had won the best director’s prize at the Venice Film Festival, and *Un Carnet de bal*, *Hôtel du Nord* and *La Grande illusion* had been enthusiastically received in America. That these predominantly studio-shot films were all inflected with a strong sense of milieu and atmosphere was testament to the way in which the French director-designer collaboration was skilled at using decor to mirror the action whilst simultaneously retaining a strong sense of individuality. Writing at the same time, Graham Greene echoed Selznick’s observations when he wrote in *The Spectator* that the best French directors had always been those who possessed ‘the trick of presenting a more intimate reality’<sup>2</sup>. This intimate reality typifies poetic realist decor - a verisimilitudinous design scheme grounded in architectural orthodoxy aligned to the accentuation of the decor with personal flourishes and symbolic punctuations that allowed for a stronger visual sense and a more profound viewing experience.

It was a decor deemed inherently performative, whereby a reciprocal transfer between individual and decor acted as an interpretative matrix for each film. It was a decor that ‘spoke’, that could paraphrase the narrative’s concerns and architecturally reflect and resonate the emotions and mental states of the individuals who inhabited them. This specificity was not just admired from afar by Hollywood, as by the mid-1930s French critics had also recognised the creation of a particular visual and architectural style. In 1936, while watching an adaptation of

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<sup>2</sup> Graham Greene, ‘*Hôtel du Nord*’, *The Spectator*, 23 June 1939, repr. in *The Pleasure-Dome: the collected film criticism of Graham Greene: 1935-1940*, ed. by John Russell Taylor (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), pp. 229-30. (p.229).

*L'Assommoir*, Georges Sadoul noticed 'des plombiers qui travailleraient sur le toit d'une maison des faubourgs parisiens, et, soudain, pour un très court instant, cette vraie maison, sous un vrai ciel de suie, transfigurait le film. Le décor était crevé. *Le principal mérite de la jeune école française est d'avoir crevé le décor*'.<sup>3</sup>

Sadoul elucidated his theory by referring to individual decor - the *guingette* in *Pension Mimosas*, the central courtyard of *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, the railway bridge in *Jenny* and the hotel in *La Belle équipe*. In contradistinction to the painted backcloths and tottering balsa-wood constructions that had characterised French studio-shot filming since its inception, Sadoul applauded the authenticity of the decor, the way it reflected the action and its organic assimilation into the narrative. Clearly then, these sets differed from 'the culturally anonymous decors of the mass-produced cinematic spectacle'.<sup>4</sup> 1930s French set designers always depended upon creating architecture with emotional possibilities, whereby the design fragment motivated the staging. It was not without good reason then, that novelist Italo Calvino claimed that French cinema smelled of real odours, as opposed to the Palmolive of American cinema.

This thesis will examine poetic realism through the optic of architectural representation and argue how studio-built spatial configurations, set design and architectonics assume symbolic weight. The study will contend that cinema architecture is not something that can be considered marginal, and that the concern of poetic realist set design to reflect ideas and emotions is crucial in trying to account for its specificity.

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<sup>3</sup> Georges Sadoul, 'Apropos de quelques films récents', *Commune*, 39 (November 1936), pp. 372-79, repr. in *Ecrits 1: Chroniques de cinéma français 1939-1967* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1978), pp. 11-17 (p.12). My emphasis. The adaptation of *L'Assommoir* was directed by Gaston Roudès in 1933.

<sup>4</sup> Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), p. 180.

All architecture is expressionism. The Mayas, the Pharaohs, and the British in India all left their vision of themselves in their architecture: where they came from, their perception of the universe and their place in it. The same claim can be tentatively applied to poetic realist set design. This is not simply to say that poetic realist decor reflected the optimism engendered by the arrival of the 1936 Popular Front government (although it did, in its valorisation of the working-class and their architectural corollary, the café), nor did the decor echo the pessimism of that government's collapse and the advent of the Second World War (although many critics have linked, *à la* Kracauer, the darker strains of poetic realism to this historical inevitability), but that the decor reflected prevailing architectural, spatial and visual trends. These included the *Neue Sachlichkeit* tendency, which sought to bring out unexpected and unseen visual qualities in quotidian surroundings, and the development of the 'city film' (exemplified by Ruttmann and Vertov) in which the pulsating rhythm and collage of buildings and monuments reflected cinema's newly acquired status as urban explorer.

However, for all its drawing on live aesthetic strands and its consistent attempt to enhance whatever emotion emanates from the scene, many French set designers have remarked that the best decor is the one which the audience should not notice, a decor which blends effortlessly into the background, allowing the story to assume prominence. Yet this act of self-effacement becomes somewhat troublesome when aligned with Dudley Andrew's claim that 'if any narrative cinema competing in the world market can be said to make a difference to film art, then poetic realism did indeed alter our conception of decor'.<sup>5</sup> Can the longevity of poetic realism's decor

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<sup>5</sup> Dudley Andrew, 'Poetic Realism', in *Rediscovering French Film*, ed. by Mary Lea Bandy (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983), pp. 115-9 (p. 119).

merely be attributed to a presence which goes unnoticed; a secondary, even tertiary participant in the narrative? Probably not. Instead, its ability to fuse organically into the background is one of a multitude of properties that characterises poetic realist decor, including its expressivity, its potential to critique or qualify the dominant narrative trajectory, its architectural orthodoxy and its appeal to popular memory. Ultimately, the set design is performative in the sense that as with other elements of the *mise en scène*, it can represent a discourse of its own, producing a fascinating dialogue with more conventional modes of film performance.

One of poetic realism's prime qualities was its control and arrangement of space and its atmospheric evocation of place, and one of the purposes of the thesis is to examine the ways in which these objectives were achieved. Yet what do the terms 'space' and 'place' actually signify? Both designations are seemingly the everywhere of modern thought and yet both resist accurate definition and produce competing meanings. It would be an impossible task to offer a comprehensive interpretation of the two values, but given the regularity with which the terms will reappear throughout the thesis, it is necessary to establish working parameters.

David Forgacs's exploration of space in Antonioni's films contains a revealing definition of cinematic space. Appreciating that divorced from any recognisable context the term is nebulous and unwieldy and its connotations fraught with euphemism, Forgacs sees space as embodying two ideas: as both a 'three-dimensional space, natural or built, which lies before the camera' and 'the space of the two-dimensional film image, bounded by the frame'.<sup>6</sup> These two kinds of space constantly interact with one another through various camera movements and shot-to-

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<sup>6</sup> David Forgacs, 'Antonioni: Space, Place, Sexuality', in *Spaces in European Cinema*, ed. by Myrto Konstantarakos, (Exeter and Portland, OR: Intellect, 2000), pp. 101-11 (p. 103).



shot transitions. Already it appears that space has been made subject of its own dichotomy, for there is a marked difference between the space *in front of* the camera - on-screen space where the action is happening juxtaposed to off-screen space which is outside the frame and unperceivable - and the space *on which* that action happens; that blank screen onto which the image is projected. Forgacs then attempts to dissect pro-filmic space into two categories - mathematical space and social space.<sup>7</sup> The mathematical space is that which simply exists, is *there* - the volumes, masses and shapes that constitute our physical existence. Buildings form a 'filled space' because they are defined by mass; the gaps between them are 'empty', vessels ready to be filled by human interaction and presence. Social space is what happens to mathematical space once it has become appropriated by society. This 'society' can then oscillate from micro- to macro-geography. It can be an individual, a community or an entire nation and Forgacs recognises this by quoting philosopher Edward Casey who argues that spaces become place-like once they are 'occupied by bodies and events'.<sup>8</sup> As each society produces its own space founded on particular centres of activity, film-makers frequently depict the individual 'spaces' of a polymorphous society as a sociological contrast. Thus 'space' is produced by society and it is through the built environment that this link between mathematical and social space is articulated; architecture, in the words of Forgacs, acts as the 'coupling'<sup>9</sup>, the means by which flat geometric 'space' is transformed into a nebulous vibrant 'place'.

Place is usually thought of as something cut out of space, and thus a specific

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout the thesis, the term 'pro-filmic' is used to designate whatever is placed in front of the camera and whatever the director shoots with the camera.

<sup>8</sup> Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Forgacs, p. 103.

location. What begins as unmediated space transforms into place as it is endowed with meaning and value. One is abstract and ephemeral, the other concrete and attainable. Put crudely, *space* becomes *place* when we do something to it - when the physical is reconstituted as the social and people fill in the gaps and occupy an empty space. Architectural theorist Greg Misingham suggests that place usually connotes 'a bounded area with a strong, figural gestalt, a space centred on some prominent feature'.<sup>10</sup> In cinematic terms, the 'gestalt', that instantly sensed design or structure, might be characterised by a bedroom or an office. In poetic realism, the 'gestalt' is frequently identified as a courtyard, a café or a town square - all boundaried action spaces which are distinguished by the dominant cultural activities that 'take place' within them.

American anthropologist Edward T. Hall's observations on theatre can be transferred to understand the underlying problematics of space and place in cinema. Hall argues that the whole theatrical contract can be delineated through its spatial organisation. Employing the term 'proxemics', which he defines as 'the interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture'<sup>11</sup>, Hall recognises three proxemic systems of space in the theatre - architectural (the theatre building itself), scenic (what the spectator sees on stage) and interpersonal (how the spectator reacts to those around them and those on stage) - and insists upon the interaction between these spaces in performance. It is the architectural sub-system that provides the key elements of the dramatic process. There is the basic structural level, as the theatre building itself conditions the possibilities of representation (size, location, design, its 'alterability'), and a second,

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<sup>10</sup>In William D. Routt, 'Demolishing A Wall', [www.sensesofcinema.com/01/14/demolishing\\_a\\_wall.html](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/01/14/demolishing_a_wall.html). 28 June 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 1.

technical level, in which the way the stage is used (sets, objects, props, costume, lighting) will signify time and place for the audience. Therefore, it is not just what takes place on stage that is dramatic, as dramatic effects can also be produced by the venue and size of the stage, its spatial position and its relation to the audience.

This architectural-technical synergy can be translated to cinema set design. Architecturally, the built set or the real location (the space) can be moulded and spatially altered to permit the most effective cinematic processes to take place. Technically, set dressing or foregrounded on-screen objects can condition the way in which the audience reads the film as well as locating them in a familiar spatio-temporal landscape (the place). Both theatre stage and cinema set are prime phenomenological spaces, charged with notions of community and human interaction even before they become populated and both are arenas for social interaction which condition the possibilities for the creation of meaning and significance. A simple example of this transformation from space to place is the 'You Were Meant For Me' sequence in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), which highlights how an empty stage can be transformed into an expressive and emotionally charged site. As a metaphor for the way in which the spectator willingly suspends their disbelief to allow the space to assume extra meaning, this scene is a useful recapitulation of cinematic space.

Unable to tell Cathy Seldon (Debbie Reynolds) that he loves her without 'the proper setting', Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) takes her to an abandoned sound stage and 'creates' the perfect scene:

'A beautiful sunrise, mist from the distant mountains, coloured lights in a garden. The lady is standing on a balcony in a rose-trellised garden flooded with moonlight. We add 500,000 kW of stardust, a soft summer breeze. You sure look beautiful in the moonlight, Cathy.'

Lockwood is the consummate cinema magician, turning on wind and smoke machines, using rose-tinted back-projection, and switching on multi-coloured spotlights to establish the 'proper setting'. If represented space is simply 'there' - a tangible three-dimensional rendition of what is within the camera's view - then expressive space combines this concreteness with a framed, two-dimensional image that symbolises mood, character and narrative development. Cinematic space must provide this opportunity for spectacle and narrative, and must be simultaneously graphic and architectural.

It is through close examination and synthesis of these ideas that a general methodology can be established to introduce notions of space and place into the context of poetic realist cinema. Cinematic space, with its blank, unmediated three-dimensionality, can be classified as film decor as it stands, divorced from any cultural connotation or authorial imprint. Cinematic place, or what becomes space when an individual does something to it, can be categorised as film decor that has been designed for a particular purpose. Although the space/place dichotomy is ultimately a frustratingly elusive concept to codify, it is necessary to acknowledge not just the regularity with which the terms will reappear in the thesis, but also to explicitly recognise the ways in which the director-designer collaboration takes a blank studio (space) and converts it into a vibrant social arena (place). Once the space has become a place, then the process of imbuing that place with a mood or expression can begin.

In poetic realism, the decor is constantly imbued with meaning. François Albera has argued that the design schemes of Lazare Meerson, one of the pioneers of the French expressive studio-bound set design, 'ne se contentent pas de définir leurs occupants, ils les déterminent, visent à modeler leur comportement en fonction d'une

structure spatiale.’<sup>12</sup> The set design is descriptive, not so much a silent shell standing detached from the action, but instead in possession of a powerful dramaturgical and symbolic charge. The figural dimensions of everyday decor fragments are foregrounded to such an extent that they can anthropomorphise into powerful visual signifiers. The stylised studio-bound urban environment defines the film’s visual ambience, enhances its emotional dimension and functions as psychic amplifier of the story. This capacity for architecture to act as resonator of mental impact is constantly explored in poetic realism and finds its apotheosis in *Le Jour se lève* (1939). Anchored to a seemingly recognisable and verisimilitudinous urban landscape, the Carné-directed and Trauner-designed film relies heavily upon atmospheric milieux, spatial specificity and the performativity inherent in studio-built environments to explore deeper levels of meaning embedded in the narrative. Both director and designer emotionalise architecture and imbue the decor with a strong spatial, visual and performative presence. By interspersing the narrative with privileged shots of a basic decor fragment, the director can introduce and invest it with a transformative power that influences the way the spectator views the film henceforth. Only after *reality* has fulfilled itself can symbolic or transcendent meanings be effected. The recurrence of *Le Jour se lève* throughout the thesis is indicative of the richness of the film’s decor and its canonisation as poetic realism’s most enduring and discussed film. Trauner sought to distil a visual concept from the thematic and psychological concerns of the screenplay, and this interface between story and style is characterised by a rhythmic recurrence of decor fragments and objects. What poetic realist set designers achieved, most notably Trauner, was the

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<sup>12</sup> François Albera, *Albatros: des Russes à Paris 1919-1929* (Milan: Mazzotta and Cinémathèque Française, 1995), p. 49

releasing of the performative from the static, taking inanimate decor and making it not just the spectatorial focal point but also the central actor in the drama.

So how might the architecturally inventive and visually fascinating poetic realist set design assume an extra-narrative significance if film architecture can be absorbed, as Walter Benjamin once suggested, only in ‘a state of distraction’? The relentless forward motion of film frequently denies us this distraction, with little opportunity afforded to look closer at the decor, treating it as a specific entity rather than part of the collective whole. What I propose throughout is to freeze-frame certain images and explore them in greater detail, aware that they form a constituent of the wider *mise en scène*, but likewise appreciative of their intrinsic performativity and evocative power in reconstituting half-forgotten places.

Despite its frequent subsidiary status, the fascination of film is often with the decor itself. There is a scene in Woody Allen’s *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) where architect Sam Waterson drives Dianne Wiest and Carrie Fisher around Manhattan to show them his favourite buildings. After passing, amongst others, the Chrysler Building, the New York Yacht Club, and the Jefferson County Courthouse, Waterson concludes, ‘People pass by vital structures in this city all the time and never take the time to appreciate them.’ The scene acts as a brief travelogue, as a meditation on the fleeting nature of urban living, but most crucially as a means of galvanising the importance of decor, whether as pre-existing structure, or more obliquely, as cinematic set design. In poetic realism, there is a similar fascination with decor, from both protagonist and spectator. Its presence in poetic realism is ubiquitous; a dominant presence that can threaten to crush the individual or offer up all the delights of the metropolis. As with Dita Parlo’s urban adventures in *L’Atalante*, looked at from afar, decor can never fail to excite, but once we are

embedded within its structures, it can exert a powerfully negative presence that can only be overcome by submitting to its totality.

\* \* \*

This study is divided into seven chapters, followed by a conclusion.

Chapter 1, *Poetic realism - defining a term*, serves to provide a detailed overview of the term 'poetic realism' which recurs throughout the entire thesis. After acknowledging the problematic status of the term, the chapter engages specifically with the key historiographical studies of poetic realism and demonstrates how each study has recognised the importance of set design and spatial configurations in the development of French realist cinema. It introduces the contention - one pursued throughout the thesis - that poetic realism is an important example of a narrativised set design. Both the 'realist' and the 'poetic' strands of the term are encapsulated in the set design - on the one hand, the establishment of an iconographically recognisable and architecturally contiguous narrative arena which signifies a certain 'Frenchness'; on the other, the embellishment or stylisation of the action space which charges the quotidian aspect of the set design with an accentuated atmosphere. The chapter introduces the notion that poetic realist decor 'speaks'; its inherent performativity demonstrating the potential to reflect and reinforce dominant thematic concerns.

Chapter 2, *The poetic realist set - theorising the decor*, has two interrelated aims. First, it examines the particularity of the relationship between cinema and architecture, focusing closely on the specificity of poetic realist decor. Through a recognition-authenticity-interaction trichotomy and three subsequent sequence

analyses, the chapter demonstrates how the decor conforms to prevailing architectural logic before being freighted with any symbolic or connotative value. It also demonstrates the contention that one of the prime qualities of poetic realist set design is the construction of a decor which becomes a token or reflection of the characters who inhabit it. Secondly, the chapter examines the connotative aspect of poetic realist design, highlighting how the design scheme can charge spatial configurations with a malign or fatalist dimension.

Chapter 3, '*Fabriqué mais pas faux*' - 1930s design practice, examines the role of the set designer and attempts to account for their peripheral status in cinema histories. The chapter also looks more closely at the working practices and architectural methods adopted by 1930s set designers, and contends that the best design practice of this period revolved around an axis of selection and stylisation; that through careful selection rather than slavish imitation, and subtle accentuation rather than explicit defamiliarisation, the decor could do more than just imbue the film with a 'look', but become the signifying fabric of the whole narrative. It will look closely at this period's *monstres sacrés*, Lazare Meerson and Alexandre Trauner, exploring both their design practices and their economy of means which exemplifies poetic realism at its most absolute. It argues that this move away from primary realism towards a more subtle approach to design conforms to Baudrillard's notion of the hyper-real.

Chapter 4, '*Un réel de synthèse*' - the location/studio dialectic, traces the way in which studio filming became the dominant mode of production during the 1930s, and highlights its difference from and preference over location shooting. It also asserts that poetic realism frequently relied upon a symbiosis of location shooting and studio-bound configurations to create its particularity. Arguing that poetic



realism was predicated upon the studio because it facilitated a co-ordinated and schematic approach to set design, it will examine in greater detail the individual spatial configurations and architectonics in the films of Jean Renoir and Marcel Carné. By comparing and contrasting their approaches to recreating urban decor, and placing them within an open vs. closed film-making matrix, the chapter suggests that the studio is the ideal laboratory for constructing the cramped and claustrophobic action spaces that typify poetic realism.

Chapter 5, *Configuring the city in poetic realism*, provides an in-depth exploration of the presentation of the city in several key films of the period. It contends that the countryside is explicitly codified as a place for escape, and that its appearance in poetic realist narratives functions as a vital opposite pole to the city, providing a geographical, architectural and abstract 'other' to the metropolis. It also suggests that the city is visualised and spatially organised in two ways - as either a malign presence, reflected in the decor, or as a locus of community, evidenced by its appropriation and democratisation by the working-class.

Chapter 6, *'Action spaces' and architectural specificity in poetic realism* has two objectives. First, it engages with the debate over whether a set should provide a functional or stylistic basis for the *mise en scène*. By examining Vitruvius's theory of architecture, the chapter examines the ways in which poetic realist decor must fulfil a verisimilitudinous function before the set can be invested with any extra-literal or symbolic resonance. Second, it introduces the concept of the 'action space'. By foregrounding and privileging basic design fragments, the director can influence a reading of the film and metaphorise the narrative concerns. The chapter suggests that the careful selection and assimilation of recognisable design fragments

is crucial in amplifying the narrative and imbuing the film with an expressive or disassociative look.

Chapter 7, '*The careful accessory - object associations in poetic realism*', develops the argument that poetic realism's status as a narrativised set design is heavily dependent upon object symbolism and the foregrounding of objects as a means of regulating the epistemic flow between protagonist and spectator. In developing the notion that poetic realist film-makers privilege the object in ways comparable to the Surrealists, the chapter is able to show how the objects allow a defamiliarised and symbolic dimension to reverberate throughout an inherently realist design scheme. This corollary between design and individual is exemplified by the object symbolism in poetic realism, and the chapter employs Louis Aragon's essay on film decor, André Bazin's seminal reading of *Le Jour se lève* and Roland Barthes's theories of photography as entry points to understanding the power of the object. The reciprocity of object and individual continues the interactive matrix between individual and design scheme, and the chapter concludes that each element of the overall design, whether action space, design fragment, furniture or object, is crucial in aligning the participation and generating the appreciation of the audience.

## Chapter 1 - Poetic realism: defining a term

The objective of this chapter is to try and provide an overview of the multiple definitions and conceptualisations of poetic realism. The chapter will begin by looking at the various cinematic approaches to poetic realism and will then highlight its intrinsic relationship with a stylised *mise en scène*, manifested most explicitly in set design. The chapter will present a genealogy of poetic realism that attempts to contextualise this cinematic phenomenon by demonstrating how the films of the 1930s were the product of a remarkable synthesis of various artistic sensibilities charged with creating and sustaining an atmospheric milieu.

A profoundly nebulous concept, poetic realism does not conform to a conventional style of theory building. Firstly, critics are divided over whether poetic realism is a monolith, a single entity possessing readily classifiable categories, or an intricate polyseme, made up of a multitude of meanings, values and components. Secondly, nowhere in the 1930s can one find a sustained, rigorously mounted theoretical argument explaining its uniqueness, and any available attempt to account for its specificity exists either in scattered, unsupported pronouncements or implicit assumptions within key critical, historical or polemical writings. Frequently applied *après le fait*, 'poetic realism' exists alongside such terms as 'expressionism' and 'neo-realism' that rarely spring from isolated sources, but are instead confluences of prevailing contemporaneous artistic and socio-historic conditions. In Bakhtinian terms, the 'text' of poetic realism is meaningless without 'context'; as a cinematic style it did not develop from a single point but was preceded by other film movements.

## Poetic realism: history of an aesthetic

To paraphrase Marc Vernet, poetic realism is ‘like a Harley-Davidson: you know right away what it is, the object being only the synecdoche of a continent, a history and a civilization, or more precisely of their representation for non-natives’.<sup>1</sup> Poetic realism arguably does stand for the whole - its most haunting images can be found on the frontispieces of most French cinema histories, it is deemed (falsely) representative of the dominant mode of French film-making in the 1930s, and it is regarded as the starting point of other broader evolutions in the development of a specifically French national cinema. In this sense, poetic realism does stand as a sort of cinematic synecdoche for any 1930s French film that displays a strong visual style and takes place in an atmospheric milieu.<sup>2</sup>

The term ‘poetic realism’ was first applied to film in 1934 by Michel Gorel in a review of Pierre Chenal’s *La Rue sans nom*: ‘J’ai dit “réalisme”, mais j’ai dit aussi “poétique”. Car même en traitant ce sujet dur, brutal, Pierre Chenal ne renonce pas à la poésie.’<sup>3</sup> However, it did not enter film historiographies as a generic term until 1949, when Georges Sadoul used it in *Histoire du cinéma mondial des origines à nos jours*. It was very rarely used directly in the 1930s; directors and critics would

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Vernet, ‘Film Noir on the edge of doom’, in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London and New York: Verso, 1993), pp. 1-31 (p. 1).

<sup>2</sup> An abiding paradox of the poetic realist corpus is that it was in no way representative of the dominant mode of film-making in the 1930s. For example, Roy Armes has shown that twenty-five per cent of all French films made between 1936-1938 (historically perceived as poetic realism’s apotheosis) were the product of just ten directors, and of those directors, only Pierre Chenal and *Crime et châtiment* could be classified as a film heavily imbued with the poetic realist aesthetic. Like all critically acclaimed cinematic movements (one thinks of the French *cinéma du look* or 1960s English social realism), these films constitute the exception rather than the rule. See ‘The Paradoxes of French Realism’, in Roy Armes, *French Cinema* (London and Warburg, 1985), pp. 86-108.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Gorel, ‘Des gratte-ciel d’amérique aux faubourgs parisiens’, *Cinéma*, 277 (8 February 1934), p. 114. The term had initially been conferred on Marcel Aymé’s novel of the same name in 1929 by Jean Paulhan, editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*.

frequently use the term 'film noir' to categorise this nascent cinematic style, preferring to distance themselves from the monolithic concepts of 'poetry' and 'realism'.<sup>4</sup>

What soon becomes clear is that poetic realism was a post-World War Two critical construct to designate those dark, atmospheric films of the mid- to late-1930s that were a counterpoint to the traditional French cinema fare of theatrical and literary adaptations or 'diversion' films. Yet despite its perpetual consecration in French cinema histories, poetic realism has never been satisfactorily defined given all the various attributes, styles, codes and visual motifs that such an indeterminate concept inevitably contains. Most historians are wary of conceptualising poetic realism into a recognisable package, using terms such as 'idiom', 'stylistic trend' and 'realist-melodramatic current' to underpin their conceptions.

It is tempting to codify poetic realism as a genre, given the stylistic, thematic and structural commonalities that recur throughout the poetic realist canon. According to Altman, for a film to be traditionally considered part of a genre, it must have 'a common topic [...] and a common structure' *which exist through time*.<sup>5</sup> Poetic realist films arguably share a basic visual and narrative commonality, but they cannot be classified alongside such easily compartmentalised genres as the western or the horror film precisely because its subject matter and popular appeal is confined to a fifteen-year time scale. Poetic realism's thematic and visual conventions were very

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<sup>4</sup> Besides Gorel's article, there are relatively few contemporaneous references which attempt to account for the specificity of poetic realism. In a 1941 interview with Lucien Combelle, Carné classified his film-making style as a 'réalisme féérique ou réalisme poétique' ('Un metteur en scène: Marcel Carné', *Le Fait*, 11 March 1941, Collection Rondel RF 352, p. 9, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris). Pierre Domène's important 1939 article uses the term 'réalisme poétique' to describe *Le Quai des brumes*, characterising poetic realism as the reconciliation of 'deux tendances contraires, la fantaisie et la vérité' ('L'Art du film: Réalisme poétique', *Dépêche*, 6 January 1939, Collection Rondel LJ PRESSE Hôtel du Nord, n.pag., Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris).

<sup>5</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), p. 23. My emphasis.

much 'of its own time' in comparison to the self-regenerating and self-reinventing aspects of other genres. The relative failure of *Les Portes de la nuit* (1946) to find favour with critics and audiences signals French film-making's definitive rupture with the dominant production values and visual style of poetic realism.

Poetic realism can be perhaps most legitimately characterised as a movement. As stated by Janey Place, film movements 'occur in specific historical periods - at times of national stress and focus of energy [and] express a consistency of both thematic and formal elements which makes them particularly expressive of those times'.<sup>6</sup> Place's formulation is crucial in understanding the position of poetic realism as both a socio-historical and a cinematic phenomenon. 'National stress' reinforces the historical circumstances behind the development of a specifically French cinematic style, namely that poetic realism acted as a kind of barometer, charting the rise and fall of optimism engendered by the 1936 Popular Front government, its subsequent collapse and the impending war. Moreover, by the mid-1930s, the bankruptcy and collapse of France's two major film companies, Pathé-Natan and Gaumont-Franco-Film-Aubert had seen the emergence of smaller independent production companies and innovative director-producer collaborations which by the end of the decade were producing as much as ninety per cent of French films. This industrial decentralisation afforded a certain amount of freedom to any director with a strong personal vision to assemble a team of skilled screenwriters, composers, cinematographers and set designers to ally themselves to a single vision. When Paul Rotha noted that: 'Nearly every film of interest which has originated from France has been the product of an individualistic artistic mind'<sup>7</sup>, he clearly recognised the

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<sup>6</sup> Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, rev. and exp. edn, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (BFI: London, 1997), pp. 47-68 (p. 49).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now: A Survey of World Cinema* (London: Vision Press, 1949), p. 295.

strong sense of the individual director's personal imprimatur which inflected many of the key films of the 1930s.

These new industrial conditions enabled French cinema to experience a stark 'focus of energy' during the 1930s. The coming of sound and the subsequent developments in lighting and studio construction meant greater freedom of cinematic experimentation, while the arrival of *émigré* filmmakers and technicians from Germany, Russia and Hungary imported conspicuous visual and stylistic techniques to French cinema. Finally, the 'thematic and formal elements' were consistent in poetic realist cinema: there was a recurrence of the same personnel, there was a homogeneous visual style and it became a standing joke among French cinema specialists that Jean Gabin would generally commit suicide or be killed at the end of film after film. Place's notion of thematic consistency is similar in methodology to Raymond Durgnat's 'The Family Tree in *Film Noir*', the first structural approach to *film noir* which attempted to compartmentalise it into a classification of overlapping motifs and tones. Durgnat's intertwining branches include gangsters, sexual pathology and crime as social criticism, creating a kind of 'image-checklist'.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the narrative and visual conventions of poetic realism can be condensed into similar subheadings: chiaroscuro lighting, studio-based set design, Jean Gabin, urban settings, petty criminals and deserters, fog, fate and destiny. The spectator is obliged to mentally tick off each of these motifs, the implicit assumption being that the more categories identified, the stronger the 'poetic realist' presence. It is this conglomeration of thematic concerns, narrative homogeneity and consistent iconography that privileges the term 'movement' over 'genre' to classify poetic

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<sup>8</sup> Raymond Durgnat, 'Paint It Black: The Family Tree of *Film Noir*', *Cinema*, 6-7 (1970), pp. 49-56, repr. in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 1996), pp. 37-51, and also condensed into a chart, 'The Family Tree of *Film Noir*', in *Film Comment* (November-December 1974), pp. 6-7.

realism. It may admittedly be inflected by a starkly common visual style and structure typical of Altman's conception of genre, but poetic realism arguably transgresses generic boundaries because its visual and formal elements may recur in a Clair comedy (*A nous la liberté*), a Renoir literary melodrama (*La Bête humaine*) or a Carné heritage film (*Les Enfants du paradis*), alongside more explicit examples, such as *Pépé le Moko* or *Le Quai des brumes*.

Once acknowledging the problematic status of trying to shoehorn poetic realism into a movement or genre, it is also necessary to mention the multitude of critical definitions which refuse to align to a consistent approach. Part of the problem can be attributed to a lack of critical consensus. Since the development of poetic realism derived from 'localized effects rather than a globally poetic conception'<sup>9</sup>, there was never a central manifesto or set of aesthetic guidelines to adhere to in this period. When Raymond Borde and Raymond Chirat interviewed Carné, Renoir and Duvivier and asked them whether they were ever conscious of belonging to the same movement, they all replied: '[W]e never philosophised together, we never planned together. We were simply professionals whom fate sometimes threw together.'<sup>10</sup>

This lack of co-ordination amongst the film-makers was correspondingly mirrored in the determination by many post-war critics to reject outright the constructive term 'poetic realism'. Arguing that all art was in some form a coalescing of realism and poetry, alternative expressions were introduced which attempted to contextualise the movement's specificity. Recognising the attraction in its vagueness, poetic realism was characterised as a critical construction with blurred edges, with critics arguing

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<sup>9</sup> Colin Crisp, *The Classic French Cinema 1930-1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; London and New York: Tauris, 1993), p. 321.

<sup>10</sup> Raymond Borde, "'The Golden Age': French Cinema of the '30s'", trans. by Catherine A. Surowiec, in *Rediscovering French Film*, ed. by Mary Lea Bandy (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983), pp. 67-81 (p. 79).



that it was a conflation and dilution of terms such as ‘populist melodrama’, ‘*réalisme noir*’ and ‘magic realism’.

Others, most notably Carné, aligned themselves to the designation *fantastique social*. Defined by Bayles as ‘an expressionistic aesthetic that depends upon the subtle defamiliarization of contemporary reality in order to create an atmosphere of fear or disquiet’<sup>11</sup>, the concept of *fantastique social* is as nebulous as poetic realism, but at least recognises the attempts film-makers were making to render the fantastic and strange nature of contemporary reality through expressionistic lighting and set design. Both the *fantastique social* and *réalisme poétique* proposed an altered perception of man’s relationship to quotidian objects, a preoccupation with atmosphere and an heightened sense of populist milieu, but most importantly, the former, coined by novelist Pierre Mac Orlan in 1926, eliminated ‘the knotty problem of realism’<sup>12</sup> and placed the stress on the social aspect of the construct. In a retrospective on Mac Orlan, Pierre Lacassin claimed that the *fantastique social* was ‘[l]ié aux structures et paysage de la vie urbaine’ and drew its mystery from ‘les lumières de la ville, dans la criminalité que dissimulent les ombres’.<sup>13</sup> Mac Orlan’s literary *fantastique social* was characterised by its documentary-style proximity to the street, its ability to pictorialise inner emotions, and a synthesis of word and image. His subject matter, like Brassai’s photographs of nocturnal Paris, evoke many of the familiar *topoi* of poetic realist cinema: dark alleyways, shadows, wet paving stones and isolated streetlamps. This combination of surface authenticity

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<sup>11</sup> Janette Kay Bayles, ‘Figuring the Object: Politics, Aesthetics and the Crisis of National Identity in Interwar French Literature and Cinema’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 1999), p. 154.

<sup>12</sup> Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 260.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Lacassin, ‘Le cinéma selon Pierre Mac Orlan’, in *L’Avant-Scène du cinéma*, 285/6 (15 April 1982), pp. 17-20 (p. 17).

underpinned by a fantastic ambiance would transfer easily to the cinema and was quickly adopted as an appropriate label for the nascent movement. Carné certainly felt more at ease with the label<sup>14</sup>, with *Le Quai des brumes* in particular demonstrating that Carné's conception of realism was essentially a fantastic one, a studio construction of Le Havre in which verisimilitude was offset by a highly unsettling atmosphere.

This lack of consensus is similarly reflected in film historiography. Recent works, including Jeancolas's *15 ans d'années trente* and Lagny, Ropars and Sorlin's *Générique des années 30* omit the term poetic realism completely, perhaps implicitly recognising its troublesome status. Virtually every other key historiographical study of French cinema contains a chapter attempting to codify poetic realism and the following quotations highlight the enormity of trying to accurately define this enduring, yet notoriously indeterminate concept:

- pessimistic urban dramas, usually set in Paris [...] in working class settings, with doomed romantic narratives often tinged with criminality;<sup>15</sup>
- a subdued prediction of film noir - *film gris*;<sup>16</sup>
- *réalisme noir*;<sup>17</sup>
- that brand of cinema which aims to illuminate the invisible lying within the normally visible world.<sup>18</sup>

What the following overview of the five key studies of poetic realism highlights is the multiplicity of meanings and evaluations inherent in attempting to define the

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<sup>14</sup> Hélène Climent-Oms, 'Carné parle', *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque*, 5 (Winter 1972), pp. 31-49 (p. 36).

<sup>15</sup> Ginette Vincendeau, *The Companion to French Cinema* (London: BFI and Cassell, 1996), p. 115-6.

<sup>16</sup> David Thomson, 'The Art of the Art Director', *American Film*, 2:4 (1977), pp. 12-20 (p. 17).

<sup>17</sup> André Bazin, *Le Cinéma français de la Libération à la Nouvelle Vague (1945-1958)*, comp. Jean Narboni (Paris: Petite Bibliothèque des Cahiers du cinéma, 1998), p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Baron Turk, *Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 102.

movement.

In *Histoire du cinéma des origines à nos jours*, Georges Sadoul did not offer a precise definition of poetic realism but rather classified it as a general tendency of French cinema which embraced numerous artistic strands. After citing Roger Manvell's 1945 article in *Film*, in which the English critic had identified a 'poetic realist school' which stemmed in part from the bankruptcy of the major studios and the creation of smaller, more independent-minded film companies, Sadoul distinguished 'l'influence du naturalisme littéraire et d'Emile Zola, certaines traditions de Zecca, Feuillade ou Delluc, certaines leçons aussi de René Clair et de Jean Vigo [...] Le réalisme poétique dut aussi quelque chose à [...] Marcel Pagnol'.<sup>19</sup> Sadoul concluded that post-1937, a darker, more pessimistic strain of poetic realism developed, which combined the visual and aesthetic influences of German Expressionism and the *Kammerspielfilm* to produce the enduring poetic realist films exemplified by *Pépé le Moko* and *Le Jour se lève*.

Sadoul's major achievement was to identify the major antecedents of poetic realism. By referencing Zola, he identified that the naturalist drive to trace the evolution of the individual through the effects of milieu was analogous to the poetic realist aesthetic. Indeed, the similarities between naturalist fiction and poetic realism are numerous: a sociological theme intent on unmasking the seamier side of life, a poetic discourse which aestheticises the sordid, a fully documented representation of a familiar milieu and a recurrence of stock characters. A connection can be made between Zola and Zecca in the latter's 1902 film *Les Victimes de l'alcoolisme*, a loose adaptation of *L'Assommoir*. Sadoul's inclusion of Pagnol refers not only to the

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<sup>19</sup> Georges Sadoul, *Histoire du cinéma mondial des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Flammarion, 1949), p. 274.

authenticity of his location shooting which also inflected the *mise en scène* of poetic realism, but likewise to the primacy of character and dialogue that Pagnol had introduced in *Merlusse* (1935), *César* (1936) and *La Femme du boulanger* (1938). Although Sadoul does not provide a clear specificity, he suggests that poetic realism did not spring from a single aesthetic current but was the confluence of a number of distinct strands. The chapter, subtitled '1930-1945', encompasses virtually every major director of the 1930s, suggesting that poetic realism is best classified as a historical period rather than a distinctive cinematic tendency.

André Bazin was the first critic to locate the interaction between character and environment in poetic realism. In his frequently referenced study of Carné's *Le Jour se lève*, Bazin examines the way decor in the film acquires a decorative and a dramatic function.<sup>20</sup> Not only do decor and individual objects serve as a verisimilitudinous anchor, conveying information about personality, lifestyle and social position, but they also function as emotional amplifiers of the narrative. Decor and objects are charged with meaning and their reappearance throughout the film is the means of interpreting the narrative. It is this aspect of Carné's films that acts as a interpretative matrix for the wider concerns of poetic realism, and Bazin ultimately argues that the movement can be best codified through close examination and deconstruction of its set design and architectonics.

This passage is particularly illuminating as it crystallises several of the key elements of poetic realism:

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<sup>20</sup> Originally published in 1948 under the title 'Fiche du *Jour se lève* in the periodical *Doc*, Bazin's article is the amalgamation of several presentations of the film he gave to *ciné-clubs* and post-war symposiums.

On voit comment le réalisme de Carné sait, tout en restant minutieusement fidèle à la vraisemblance de son décor, le transposer poétiquement, non pas en le modifiant par une transposition formelle et picturale, comme le fit l'Expressionnisme allemand, mais en dégagant sa poésie immanente, en le contraignant à révéler de secrets accords avec le drame. C'est en ce sens qu'on peut parler du 'réalisme poétique' de Marcel Carné, qui le distingue sensiblement du réalisme beaucoup plus objectif d'un Grémillon par exemple (le lyrisme de Grémillon s'appuie moins sur le décor) mais surtout d'un Clément ou d'un Rouquier. En dépouillant presque totalement l'Expressionnisme allemand de ses recours à des transpositions visibles du décor, Carné a su intérioriser intégralement l'enseignement poétique, ce que le Fritz Lang du *Maudit* avait déjà su faire sans pourtant parvenir à se priver toujours, comme Carné, d'utiliser symboliquement la lumière et le décor. La perfection du *Jour se lève*, c'est que la symbolique n'y précède jamais le réalisme, mais qu'elle l'accomplit comme par surcroît [...] L'art de Carné et de ses collaborateurs est de faire que la réalité, qu'elle soit psychologique (les personnages de Berry, de Françoise, de Clara) ou matérielle (le décor, la cigarette, l'armoire), joue d'abord à plein sa fonction de réalité avant d'insinuer ses valeurs de symbole. Comme si la poésie ne commençait de rayonner qu'à l'instant où précisément l'action paraît s'identifier aux détails les plus vraisemblables.<sup>21</sup>

Only after the decor has fulfilled a mimetic function can symbolic associations begin to emanate. Bazin's deconstruction of the *mise en scène* may have only applied to one film, but his observations on the subtle interaction between decor, objects and individual as well as his identification of a link to and similarities with the German Expressionist aesthetic marks his study out as a key text in defining the specificity of poetic realism. The recognition that decor was an amplifier of narrative concerns was an explicit acknowledgment that the depiction of an atmospheric milieu was insufficient to establish a connection between individual and environment. What was necessary was a milieu which visualised the narrative and mirrored individual emotional and mental states.

The chapter on poetic realism in the fourth volume of Jean Mitry's *Histoire du cinéma* defines the movement as 'un expressionnisme atténué inséré dans les normes et les conditions du réel immédiat'.<sup>22</sup> Identifying its antecedents in Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919), Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (1930) and Lang's *M* (1931), Mitry

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<sup>21</sup> Bazin, pp. 91-2, p. 101.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Mitry, *Histoire du cinéma: Art et Industrie*, 5 vols. (Paris: Jean-Pierre Delarge, 1980), IV: 1930-40, p. 292.

argues that poetic realism is a global cinematic tendency, and much of his seventy-page chapter is taken up identifying and classifying poetic realism in American, Scandinavian, Japanese and British national cinemas. He continues by proposing that poetic realism was the dominant aesthetic in 1930s French cinema, listing Pierre Chenal and Edmond Gréville alongside Vigo, Duvivier, Carné and Renoir as the most representative directors of the movement. Mitry suggests that the poetic realist director did not reproduce reality but re-created it, most notably in a stylised milieu. Like Bazin, he reinforced the primacy of set design by highlighting how the poetic realist set designer would distil reality down to its most common characteristics in order to express an essential truth of human nature. Poetic realism displayed a degree of formal stylisation which was most manifestly visualised through the decor. Protagonists were ‘déterminé par le milieu qui les englobe’<sup>23</sup>, a milieu which assumed a value independent of its narrative function due to the stylisation of the set and the symbolic interaction between individual and decor.

In *Republic of Images*, Alan Williams was the first non-French historian to propose a catalogue of the key poetic realist films. The list read: *La Rue sans nom* (Chenal, 1933), *Le Grand jeu* (Feyder, 1934), *Crime et châtiment* (Chenal, 1935), *Pension Mimosas* (Feyder, 1935), *Jenny* (Carné, 1936), *Pépé le Moko* (Duvivier, 1936), *La Belle équipe* (Duvivier, 1936), *Gueule d’amour* (Grémillon, 1937), *L’Alibi* (Chenal, 1937), *Hôtel du Nord* (Carné, 1938), *Le Quai des brumes* (Carné, 1938), *La Bête humaine* (Renoir, 1938), *Le Jour se lève* (Carné, 1939), *Le Dernier tournant* (Chenal, 1939), *Menaces* (Gréville, 1939) and *Remorques* (Grémillon, 1939-41).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Williams, *Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 419.

Williams's list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. Unlike Sadoul and Mitry, he fails to recognise that both René Clair and Jean Vigo were filming darkly populist material in the early 1930s which could be classified as early examples of poetic realism. An emphasis on an expressive visual tone, the primacy of built space and a marrying of form and content (atmospheric Paris and a narrative grounded in realism) can be detected in these directors, and as such, they foreshadow the poetic realist aesthetic. Clair and Vigo invested decor with a grandeur which lifted the populist narratives out of the routine and imbued them with a poetic significance. John Grierson argued that in *L'Atalante*, Vigo fused naturalism and symbolism to create 'a sense of documentary realism which makes the barge a real barge [...] But on top of the realism is a crazy Vigo world of symbols and magic'.<sup>25</sup> The film's spatial constructions, most notably the barge interior, typify poetic realism's emphasis on the evocative and symbolic power of the decor. Moreover, by omitting both *La Nuit du carrefour* (1932) and *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1935), Williams ignores those poetic realist films which depend upon strongly configured spatial geometries. The former combines misty location shooting with claustrophobic interiors, providing an aesthetic precursor to both the look and mood of Carné's *Le Quai des brumes* and American *film noir*; the latter, with its construction of community through an organic set design and experiments with geometric formalism again conforms to a certain strand of poetic realism based on the primacy of set design and architectonics.

The conclusion of Dudley Andrew's masterly book-length study of 1930s French cinema, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* seems to be

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<sup>25</sup> In Marina Warner, *L'Atalante* (London: BFI, 1993), p. 10.

no closer to offering an all-encompassing *point de repère*.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, he formulates two crucial notions on the specificity of poetic realism which goes beyond simple identification of thematic elements or the recognition of a definitive corpus. Concluding that the thread of poetry entered poetic realism through Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* and the thread of realism was transferred through Zola and Feuillade, Andrew classifies poetic realism as an *optique*, or 'a sensibility, a function, and a mode of address'.<sup>27</sup> His notion of the *optique* indicates the finite series of cinematic possibilities open to a film-maker at a given time which can be defined as the recurrence of a set of themes, a unified visual tone, audience appeal, socio-cultural function and the spectatorial experience offered by poetic realism. By moving beyond wholly text-based interpretations of poetic realism, Andrew's notion of the *optique* permits a deeper, more composite examination of the triangular relationship between poetic realist films, their contemporaneous audience and their historical context.

When Andrew addresses the particularity of poetic realist decor, he examines the depiction of a character in relation to their surroundings. This relationship can be read as that of an actor on a set or stage (theatrical), that of a character in a locale (fictional) or that of a figure in a milieu (poetic). The theatrical paradigm is appropriated in mass entertainment films in which the music hall star performs for the audience. The second mode can be illustrated by the realist films of Jean Renoir where the actor disappears behind the role they have created. In the final category, the figural personage encapsulates not just the actor and the character but also the

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<sup>26</sup> A glance through the index under the heading 'poetic realism, definitions of' reveals eighteen entries.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew, *Mists of Regret*, p. 25.



symbolic attributes that they embody. The poetic realist decor functions as a milieu, as ‘something beyond actor and character, something beyond set and setting’.<sup>28</sup>

### **A narrativised set design**

What all of these abstractions of poetic realism explicitly recognise is the primacy of an atmospheric set design and the symbolic resonances which may emanate from the physical setting of the film. In their discussion of art direction and film narrative, Charles and Mirella Jona Affron define narrativised design as a decor which ‘becomes the narrative’s organising image, a figure that stands for the narrative itself’ and a decor which ‘we come to know [...] intimately’.<sup>29</sup> In short, the narrativised set design enjoys a privileged relationship with both the narrative and the spectator.

In the first category, it is the visual ambiance of the film which becomes the prime organising feature of poetic realism. In his study of landscape in the cinema, P. Adams Sitney notes that ‘as the syntax of filmic narrative congealed, genres emerged which were predicated upon dramatizing the situation of individuals in distinctive landscapes’.<sup>30</sup> Problems of terminology notwithstanding, 1930s French poetic realist cinema was one such manifestation of Sitney’s ‘emerging genres’; like the western or *film noir*, poetic realism is grounded on a clearly recognisable visual atmosphere where spectatorial understanding is driven as much by setting as plot. Indeed, this

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<sup>28</sup> Dudley Andrew, ‘Poetic Realism’, in *Rediscovering French Film*, ed. by Mary Lea Bandy (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983), pp. 115-9 (p. 119).

<sup>29</sup> Charles and Mirella Jona Affron, *Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 158-9.

<sup>30</sup> P. Adams Sitney, ‘Landscape in the Cinema: the rhythms of the world and the cinema’, in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, ed. by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 103-26 (p. 109).

connection between decor and individual is so potent that 'it radically reduces the function of plot'<sup>31</sup>, so that the narrative is transferred onto the decor, rather than onto the script. By recognising that poetic realism is inextricably bound up in the reciprocity of individual and milieu, the aforementioned contrasting definitions of the term always recognise the presence of a stylised *mise en scène* and a highly atmospheric decor. The decor assumes a vital aesthetic function - tending to invest less in narrative and more in description, poetic realism emphasises the connotative relationship between environment and character to the point where a specific milieu can become the central character of the film.

In the Affrons' second category, the presence of the decor exerts a powerful influence on the spectator. As the inanimate set assumes extra-narrative characteristics and creates a dynamic site for character development, a contiguous space is constructed which pulls the spectators into the foreground, transforming them into active participants in the narrative. This is a fundamental concept of poetic realism - the decor as a composite of connotative characteristics that is to be deciphered by the viewer.

In 1936, Georges Sadoul wrote that 'la jeune école française par son réalisme remarquable, crée des atmosphères, des types, des oeuvres qui seront connus du monde entier et qui auront [...] l'influence la plus profonde sur l'évolution du cinéma international'.<sup>32</sup> Sadoul was not only acknowledging the increased importance French directors were placing on the set to create a certain atmosphere but recognising how the set could inscribe a new look to 1930s French cinema. This identification of an accentuated decor imbued with dramatic significance can

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<sup>31</sup> Andrew, 'Poetic Realism', p. 119.

<sup>32</sup> Georges Sadoul, 'Apropos de quelques films récents', *Commune*, 39 (November 1936), pp.372-79, repr. in *Ecrits I: Chroniques de cinéma français 1939-1967* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1978), pp. 11-17 (p. 17).

arguably be related to other broader evolutions in 1930s French cinema, most notably the increasing popularity of the atmosphere film. By the early 1930s, the *film d'atmosphère* had become an acceptable and established genre within the industry, where the creation of an atmosphere came to be seen as a desirable quality in the more socially relevant art forms of the novel and the film. For several artists, this atmospheric recreation of a proletarian milieu was an important way of creating a reciprocal connection between individual and environment. Anatole Litvak responded to criticism that his film *Coeur de lilas* was too 'âpre et cruel' by asserting that 'l'atmosphère [...] est et doit rester à la base de toute réalisation'.<sup>33</sup> This consecration of the privileging of atmosphere became the most noticeable visual motif of poetic realism. In turn, novelist Francis Carco's 1930 article 'Il nous faut des films d'atmosphère' observed how Clair's *Sous les toits de Paris* had introduced the notion of atmosphere to the cinema with its picturesque set design and intimate portrayal of *petites gens* 'que personne encore ne nous a jusqu'à présent révélé'.<sup>34</sup> Carco recognised that Clair had achieved this through a synthesis of word and image; one was not sacrificed to the other. By reconstituting the *topoi* of working-class Paris, film-makers sought to imbue the narrative with a strong sense of popular milieu, whereby instantly recognisable architectural signifiers became powerful metonyms of the *quartier*.

Poetic realist film-makers were frequently admonished for seeing through a glass darkly, for underscoring the brutal and ignoring the beautiful. Yet despite a concentration on images of pessimism, the films were shot through with a

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<sup>33</sup> Anatole Litvak, 'Le Film d'Atmosphère doit remplacer le 100% parlant', *Cinémonde*, 167 (31 December 1931), p. 874.

<sup>34</sup> Francis Carco, 'Il nous faut des films d'atmosphère', *Cinémonde*, 112 (11 December 1930), p. 795. Carco's glowing review of *Le Quai des brumes* in *Le Figaro* was testament to how far he believed Carné has created a film full of atmosphere and mood.

translucent beauty that offered a degree of hope. Alastair Phillips suggests that one of the persistent aspects of 1930s French realist cinema was an ‘almost ethnographic interest in the listing, picturing and recording the ordinary world of the city’.<sup>35</sup> This theme ran strongly through the work of the Hungarian *émigré* photographer Brassai, who throughout the 1930s took thousands of photographs of traditionally working-class areas of Paris with the skill of a documentarist and the visual style of an artist. By avoiding the immediate light of lamp-posts and diffusing it instead behind trees and allowing it to reflect on rainy streets, the visual similarity between Brassai’s photography and the visual *topoi* of poetic realism is striking: the photographs *Nighthawks* (in which city employees empty a cesspit) and the grainy *Passers-By In The Rain* could have been taken as still frames from *Le Quai des brumes* or *Le Jour se lève* given that they both offer visual echoes of the luminescent and hauntingly transcendental quality of the city streets that Trauner refabricated in his most memorable sets.<sup>36</sup> Poetic realism ushered into French cinema a heightened awareness of space and a sensibility for atmosphere. By perpetuating the legacy of those pictorial-naturalist films such as Delluc’s *Fièvre* (1921) and *La Femme de nulle part* (1923) that had turned industrial wildernesses and deserted streets into highly atmospheric depictions of urban space, directors such as Carné and Vigo privileged the primacy of atmosphere, transmuting the urban mundane into the material of poetry.

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<sup>35</sup> Alastair Phillips, ‘The camera goes down the streets: *Dans les rues* (Victor Trivas, 1933) and the Paris of the German *émigrés*’, *Modern & Contemporary France*, 8:3 (2000), pp. 325-34 (p. 330).

<sup>36</sup> Brassai recognised this confluence in ‘Techniques de la photographie de la nuit’, a prefatory essay to his 1933 collection of photographs, *Paris de Nuit*, in which he compared the city at night to a darkened studio set. Alain Sayag, curator of the Centre Pompidou who loaned photographs to London’s Hayward Gallery for the recent exhibition ‘Brassai: The Soul of Paris’ claimed that Brassai’s snapshots of everyday Paris life were as carefully constructed as a film set: ‘You can see that nothing is accidental, nothing can be done quickly, everything must be planned in advance, contrived and designed.’ (in Maev Kennedy, ‘Soul of Paris - iconic images go on show’, *Guardian*, 22 February 2001, p. 5).

This arguably accounts for why a significant number of poetic realist films were adapted from French interwar novels: *La Rue sans nom*, *Gueule d'amour*, *Le Quai des brumes*, *Pépé le Moko* and *Hôtel du Nord* were all imbued with a richly textured visual atmosphere which found a visual cognate on the screen.<sup>37</sup> When Carné issued his clarion call for film-makers to 'go down the streets' and capture the essence of the city in 1933, he lavished praise on writers like Pierre Mac Orlan and Eugène Dabit whose work he was later to adapt, highlighting the inherent visuality of their novels and applauding their atmospheric grasp of traditional Parisian spaces. Dabit's novel *Hôtel du Nord* was an autobiographical collection of anecdotes about the eponymous hotel and its various residents. Awarded the *Prix Populiste* in 1930, the novel was explicitly referenced by Carné in his celebrated *Cinémagazine* article and was immortalised in his 1938 film. In the article, Carné enthused about Dabit's authentic depiction of milieu and the novel's inherent humanity:

[E]t surtout *Hôtel du Nord*, où s'agite 'dans un décor d'usines, de garages, de fines passerelles, de tombereaux qu'on décharge, tout le monde pittoresque et inquiétant des abords du canal Saint-Martin.'

Populisme, direz-vous. Et après? Le mot pas plus que la chose ne nous effraie. Décrire la vie simple des petites gens, rendre l'atmosphère d'humanité laborieuse qui est la leur, cela ne vaut-il pas mieux que de reconstituer l'ambiance trouble et surchauffée des dancings, de la noblesse irréaliste, des boîtes de nuit dont le cinéma a fait jusqu'alors si abondamment profit?<sup>38</sup>

Behind Carné's rhetoric lies two key points. Firstly, a conscious desire by the film-maker to create a more democratic cinema that would combine populism with underlying social comment to celebrate and ennoble the working-class. The second is the implicit connection between individual and milieu. To describe the life of the working-class required a picturesque and expressive decor to highlight the way in

<sup>37</sup> The source novels of these films were written by, respectively, Marcel Aymé, André Beucler, Pierre Mac Orlan, Henri La Barthe and Eugène Dabit.

<sup>38</sup> Marcel Carné, 'Quand le cinéma descendra-t-il dans la rue?', in *Cinémagazine*, 13 (November 1933), repr. in Robert Chazal, *Marcel Carné* (Paris: Seghers, 1965), pp. 94-6 (p. 96).

which popular Paris was dominated by the endless intermingling of class, gender and the heterogeneity of the *quartier*.

Poetic realism lies in the reconciliation of two paradoxical tendencies - the realism of its subject matter juxtaposed to a poeticised transformation of that realism through a stylised *mise en scène*. Throughout the 1930s, film critics were keen to place poetic realism at the confluence of the Lumière and Méliès tradition - the almost documentary-like depiction of a working-class *quartier* combined with an accentuated visual style, and to a large extent, this fusing together of the real and the un-real - 'le goût du document concret et l'abandon à l'imaginaire affectif'<sup>39</sup> - defines poetic realism as a certain poetic feel to be found in daily reality. The 'realism' coalesced around the choice of subject matter: the depiction of the *petites gens* and a focus on contemporary urban life, while the 'poetic' alluded to the stylistic treatment of that subject matter: symbolism was accentuated, so that milieu and language were heightened to the point of abstraction. Poetic realism did not aspire to be an accurate reproduction of external reality, but instead a poeticisation of reality, achieved primarily through an accentuated visual style. Even though the purported 'realism' was not always entirely plausible (working-class heroines, like Annabella in *Hôtel du Nord*, would deliver their lines with annoyingly immaculate enunciation), it certainly focused in greater detail on the working class and *les faubourgs*. Carné, Duvivier, Renoir and Grémillon all shared Baudelaire's zeal to transmute the urban everyday into the material of poetry. It is this confluence of the quotidian and the expressive that typifies poetic realism and explicitly connects it with the documentary discourse of the real to create a perfect conjunction.

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<sup>39</sup> Henri Agel, '1922-1957: Le Réalisme poétique français', *CinémAction*, 55 (1990), pp. 41-5 (p. 41).

## Conclusion

Quand je peins un arbre, je mets tout le monde mal à l'aise. C'est parce qu'il y a quelque chose, quelque'un caché derrière cet arbre. Je peins malgré moi les choses cachées derrière les choses. Un nageur pour moi, c'est déjà un noyé.

Michel Krauss's comments in *Le Quai des brumes* as he explains his painterly aesthetic is an apt recapitulation of a cinematic term which shall dominate this thesis. Krauss (Robert Le Vigan) subliminally underlines the notion that in poetic realism, all is not as it first appears and that behind a facade of normality resides infinite layers of contrasting meanings and hidden forces. Poetic realism synergistically enveloped a documentary-style realism in an abstracted, accentuated *mise en scène*, so that reality was not reflected but transformed, even distorted to the point of sublimation. Sublimation is used here not in the conventional Freudian sense of the word, whereby sexual urges are replaced with socially acceptable activities, but in the chemical context - the process whereby a solid is changed into a gaseous state by heating it and then changed back into a solid to make it more refined. In poetic realism, this sublimation is effected most noticeably in the decor. Under the transforming influence of director and designer, the decor passes through its functional state to a symbolic one, becoming an unalloyed signifier of narrative concerns. Whilst the wide range of historical formulations is characteristic of poetic realism's conceptual richness, any form of congruity that does exist is manifested through the recurrent visual motifs of the *mise en scène*, the centrality of atmosphere, and most importantly, the primacy of the set design in which poetic realism's most enduring mytho-iconographic influence resides.

In reading poetic realism in this way, as a single whole, my objective is not to overlook the inevitable differences between the darker and lighter strands of poetic realism, but instead to evince a consistency and coherence of design that exist in

both strands. The set designer's consistent strategy was to use decor as an amplifier of narrative concerns. Moreover, if the poetic realist narrative depended upon the creation of a tangible atmosphere where the human dramas could unfold, then the visual ambiance of the film was of supreme importance in delineating the arena where these dramas would play out. Like that other archetype of narrativised set design, German Expressionism, poetic realism depended heavily on the pictorial for its creation of atmosphere, and this stark visual quality was manifested most explicitly in a stylised and accentuated decor. Paul Rotha argued that German Expressionism broke with cinematic realism by suggesting that a film need not be 'a reality' but 'a possible reality [which] brought into play the mental psychology of the audience'.<sup>40</sup> Poetic realism attempted to achieve a similar transposition - to not break with conventional depictions of reality, but to suggest and imply a reality that could reflect back to the audience a stylised representation of the everyday. It was arguably only once they had constructed their own environment that poetic realist directors could then make the decor play an active role in the narrative. They recognised that individual landscapes and milieux possessed a significance of their own, transforming themselves into not just the site for the narrative but also as the very reason for the narrative itself. Having characterised poetic realism as a form of narrativised set design, the following chapter will look more closely at the poetic realist set and examine its architectural, phenomenological and visual specificity.

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<sup>40</sup> Rotha, p. 256.



## Chapter 2 - The poetic realist set: theorising the decor

Créer une atmosphère [...] tel est le rôle sommaire du décor.<sup>1</sup>

You can't trust anything on a film set, least of all the architecture.<sup>2</sup>

Of all the constituent elements of poetic realist cinema, it is the set design that has proved to be the most historically durable and artistically memorable. For Henri Agel, the sets in *Le Jour se lève* 'ne peuvent plus s'effacer de la mémoire', due partly to the way in which the street lamp illuminates François's apartment block in a way that 'aucun autre lampadaire ne le fait'.<sup>3</sup> It was this isolation of familiar design fragments foregrounded in a stylised, highly distinctive manner which exemplified the poetic realist set. Through a subtle interaction of individual decor and aggregated *mise en scène*, poetic realist films imprinted themselves on the collective conscious.

The purpose of this chapter is three-fold: to explore the poetic realist set from an architectural level, looking meticulously at the ways in which the set relates to more general theories of cinematic architecture and design. I shall then investigate the phenomenology of the poetic realist set, looking closely at how it 'works'. By examining the decor in *Quatorze juillet* (1932), *La Kermesse héroïque* (1935) and *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1935), I will demonstrate how the set is a confluence of familiarity, authenticity and interaction. Agel may recognise that a core element of poetic realism is its visual primacy; its 'to-be-looked-at-ness', but the decor must function initially as a verisimilitudinous spatial arena before any symbolic or poetic

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<sup>1</sup> Léon Moussinac, *Naissance du cinéma* (Paris: Povolozky, 1925), p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Hobbs, 'Film Architecture: The Imagination of Lies', in *Cinema and Architecture: Méliès, Mallet-Stevens, Multimedia*, ed. by François Penz and Maureen Thomas, (London: BFI, 1997), pp. 166-172 (p. 172).

<sup>3</sup> In Geneviève Guillaume-Grimaud, *Le Cinéma du Front Populaire* (Paris: Lherminier, 1986), p. 76.

resonances may emanate. I shall conclude by looking at the connotative power of poetic realist sets and show how meaning in the narrative can be resonated and reflected through a carefully modulated decor.

## Film and architecture

In Nathanael West's 1939 Hollywood novel, *The Day of the Locust*, trainee set designer and artist Tod Hackett finds himself wandering alone through the various illusory worlds of a studio backlot:

From the steps of the temple, he could see in the distance a road lined with Lombardy poplars. It was the one on which he had lost the cuirassiers. He pushed his way through a tangle of briars, old flats and iron junk, skirting the skeleton of a Zeppelin, a bamboo stockade, an adobe fort, the wooden horse of Troy, a flight of baroque palace stairs that started in a bed of weeds and ended against the branches of an oak, part of the Fourteenth Street elevated station, a Dutch windmill, the bones of a dinosaur, the upper half of the Merrimac, a corner of a Mayan temple, until he finally reached the road.<sup>4</sup>

From a distance, Hackett looks back and surveys the view. This 'gigantic pile of sets, flats and props' is the final dumping ground of Hollywood's used and discarded sets; a 'Sargasso of the imagination'. Hackett concludes 'there wasn't a dream afloat somewhere which wouldn't sooner or later turn up on it [the rubbish dump], having first been made photographic by plaster, canvas, lathe and paint [...] No dream ever entirely disappears'.<sup>5</sup> This exploration of the darker revelations of film's deceit is a persuasive example of the mutual reciprocity between film and architecture, and as

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<sup>4</sup> Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust* (London: Grey Walls Press, 1951), p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 123. A previous dream has recently reappeared. After completing *The Ten Commandments* (1956), Cecil B. de Mille left the film set buried in the Egyptian desert and an archeological team is currently uncovering it. For further information on the progress of the excavation and accounts on the legendary excesses on the production (on set were 125 cooks making 7500 sandwiches a day), see [www.lostcitydemille.com](http://www.lostcitydemille.com).

such, could be seen as representative of the synergy between the two. West intimates that one is powerless without the other; that film needs decor in order, literally, to ‘take place’ and decor needs film to guarantee its longevity. Although this relationship as portrayed in *The Day of the Locust* may initially seem a little one-sided, decor’s reliance upon film could be explored from a number of viewpoints, such as the influence of cinema on contemporary architecture.<sup>6</sup>

However, in its inherent abstractness, it is arguably music that has historically been seen as the art form closest to architecture.<sup>7</sup> Any attempt to find a reciprocity between architecture and film is generally stymied by critics who routinely cite several fundamental differences between the two:

- cinema is a representational art and architecture a presentational one;
- cinema is dynamic, architecture is static;
- the cinematic experience is bisensory (limited to sight and hearing), the architectural experience is spontaneous and multi-sensory;
- cinema separates the spectator from the image, architecture encourages participation.

The general conclusion is that architecture is the celebration of space and film is, as James Stewart once suggested, ‘tiny pieces of time’. Yet cinema is arguably closer

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Vincent Korda’s visions of a multi-story atrium in *Things to Come* (1936) materialised in John Portman’s huge interiors for the San Francisco Hyatt Regency project in the 1980s.

<sup>7</sup> In a recent article, architect Daniel Libeskind borrows Eisenstein’s formulation that ‘a good building is like frozen music.’ Libeskind was a student of John Hedjuk, who in the late 1970s at the Union School of Architecture in New York advanced the theory that all architecture sought connections with other fields of art. Subsequent architectural projects have been generated through analysis of the composition and structure of *Finnegan’s Wake*, Vermeer’s paintings and Bach. Libeskind’s recent Jewish Museum Berlin is partly inspired by Schoenberg’s unfinished opera *Moses and Aaron*. (*The Guardian Review*, 13 July 2002, p. 17).

to architecture in spatio-temporal structure and mutual articulation of lived space than any other art, and as such, a *rapprochement* between film and architecture should be recognised. René Clair proposed that cinema was the closest approximate art to architecture and Paul Rotha argued that the film-maker and the architect were both charged with weaving 'diverse media into a new reality'.<sup>8</sup> More recently, film-makers have begun to take both art forms as interdependent and some of the most celebrated contemporary architects have recognised the importance of cinema in the formation of their approach to architecture.<sup>9</sup>

In her early essay on cinema, Virginia Woolf attempted to conceptualise the new developments in film architecture and account for the new-found accuracy of set design in mirroring human emotions:

For a moment, it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than words [...] The dream architecture of arches and battlements, of cascades falling and fountains rising, which sometimes visits us in sleep or shapes itself in half-darkened rooms, could be realised before our waking eyes.<sup>10</sup>

Written in 1925, and therefore heavily influenced by the abstracted and accentuated nature of German Expressionist cinema, Woolf not only offered ample evidence of cinema's ability to depict the intensity of urban living, but also vouched for architecture's capacity to conjure up fascination and to convey thoughts more effectively by space rather than words. What she concluded was that cinema could depict the monumentality of modern architecture and imbue that architecture with emotion and symbolic power.

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now: A Survey of World Cinema* (London: Vision Press, 1949), p. 258.

<sup>9</sup> For example, see *CinémaAction*, 75 (1995), in which Françoise Puaux interviews architects Paul Chemetov, Ricardo Porro, Roland Castro and Jean Nouvel, pp. 91-106. For Nouvel, the reciprocity between the two lies in them being 'une forme d'inscription et de traduction de la réalité' (p. 104).

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'The Movies and Reality', in *Authors on Film*, ed. by Harry M. Geduld (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1972), pp. 86-91 (p. 89, p. 91).

Arnold Hauser has suggested that in film, space loses its static, serene quality and is dynamised to become something 'fluid, unlimited, unfinished, *an element with its own history*'.<sup>11</sup> Like architecture, film is predicated upon the creation of space, and both are connected to history through function and longevity. Thus if film can be manifested with its 'own history', then the interconnection between the two arts moves even closer. Film is the spatialisation of time, for more so than any other plastic art, the spectator is the privileged recipient of a multiplicity of viewpoints and rhythms as space loses its static quality. In short, film allows space to 'move'. In his article 'Montage and Architecture', Sergei Eisenstein established this position by contrasting two 'paths' of the spatial eye. In the cinematic path, the spectator follows an imaginary line through a series of objects, or 'diverse positions passing in front of an immobile spectator', while in the architectural path, the spectator moves through a series 'of carefully disposed phenomena which he observes[s] in order with his visual sense'.<sup>12</sup> It is through this shift from real to imaginary movement that cinematic space can be opened up and explored, highlighting the affinity between architecture and cinema based on a rhythmic succession of multiple viewpoints. As we move through a building, that building moves with us, expanding, hiding, and changing perspective. Film is invested with a similar dynamism; a kineticism triggered and enhanced by techniques such as the tracking shot and the deep focus, which will be explored in greater detail in chapter 4. Ultimately, the reciprocities are numerous: both are the projections of fantasies onto a blank space, both are intended to be 'looked at', both are artistic processes rather than natural ones and are reliant

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<sup>11</sup> Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art: Naturalism, Impressionism, The Film Age* (London: Routledge, 1989) p. 227. My emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> Sergei M. Eisenstein, 'Montage and Architecture', in *Towards a Theory of Montage*, ed. by Michael Glenny and Richard Taylor, trans. by Michael Glenny, vol. 2 of *Selected Works* (London: BFI, 1991), pp. 59-81 (p. 59).

on the collective efforts of many specialists, both have expressive qualities, and both rely upon the primacy of vision.

Using Juan Antonio Ramirez's typology, six characteristics of film decor can be identified. By relying upon the traditional comparisons between architecture and cinema, Ramirez draws comparisons and differences between set design and built architecture.<sup>13</sup> The specificity of these qualities is an important starting point in my exploration and understanding of the visual and architectural particularity of poetic realist decor. The following observations will subsequently be examined through the prism of poetic realist set design:

- Film decor is fragmentary; only pro-filmic space is built or simulated and the spaces beyond the confines of the frame are simply suggested.
- Film decor alters size and proportion; the set designer does not always rigorously adhere to prevailing architectural and perspectival orthodoxy and spatial dimensions will often be altered and accentuated to allow for stylised embellishment. Set designers need not be architecturally faithful to past or present styles because the intention of cinematic decor is not so much as to inform as to evoke a particular moment and place relevant to a dramatic situation.
- Film decor is not orthogonal; as with forced perspective, the angles, shapes and volumes of the set design may be distorted to gain the desired effect.
- Film decor is hyperbolic; cinematic decor eradicates insignificant or extraneous details and the remainder are either exaggerated or simplified in accordance with the desired narrative and visual effect.

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<sup>13</sup> See Charles and Mirella Jona Affron, *Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative* (New

- Film decor is mobile; the plasticity of film decor enables it to be re-used. As well as having important financial ramifications, the elastic, endlessly negotiable properties of decor means that cinematic place can be easily created and then dismantled or re-dressed for another film.
- Film decor is built and demolished rapidly; another economic factor, the final property of film decor is perhaps most useful as a metaphor for the very ephemerality of filmic 'space'. Unlike architecture, film decor is not constructed to last in concrete form but only in the spectator's subconsciousness.

The fragmentary property of film decor is generally reflected in most poetic realist environments, where only the space deemed absolutely necessary to the demands of the narrative would be constructed. The sets never went beyond what the camera required; instead, techniques such as a *trompe l'œil* backdrop or a *découverte* were employed to suggest a sense of depth and materiality. When further decor was needed that could not always be realistically built (through constraints of time or expense), the director resorted to 'importing' real locations - for example, the documentary cutaways to the real Casbah in *Pépé le Moko*, the Le Havre dockside in *Le Quai des brumes* and the bird's-eye-view panorama of Paris in *Les Portes de la nuit*. A polemical contrast to this practice was the decision by Carné and Trauner to reconstruct virtually brick for brick the metro station at Barbès-Rochechouart for the opening sequences of *Les Portes de la nuit*. Instead of relying on location shooting or a certain portion of the station reconstituted in the studio, the director and designer sought maximum verisimilitude and control of the film-making process, which in turn ignited fierce debate over the whole location vs. studio filming aesthetic.

Two notable exceptions are the courtyard in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* and François's room in *Le Jour se lève*. In the former, set designer Jean Castanier built the courtyard as authentically as possible by making it a four-walled construction. Trauner also designed the room in *Le Jour se lève* as a four-walled construction rather than the typical three-walled set, thus enhancing the authenticity of the room and increasing the sense of claustrophobia. This visual sense of entrapment is greatly enhanced by the design of the room. Trauner's sets were built from four interlocking and immovable panels, allowing Jean Gabin to be filmed moving from one side of the room to the other in the same shot. This architectonic innovation highlights Carné's fundamental reliance upon a 'closed' set, rigidly defined by the frame. By recreating the desired spatial configurations and allowing the camera to film reverse-angle shots, Trauner's reconstitution of the studio-based reality permitted more complex camera manoeuvring and a stylised atmosphere.<sup>14</sup> In both *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* and *Le Jour se lève*, the reality effect was increased, grounding the spectator in a spatially contiguous environment and allowing various camera movements which played backgrounds off foregrounds.

Poetic realist set designers would frequently distort or alter perspective to create a greater sense of depth and size in the decor. Rochus Gliese famously used forced perspective in his set designs for F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927), whereby the objects in the foreground were often unusually large, making the background recede in an exaggerated fashion. Lazare Meerson adopted this technique in his sets for Jacques Feyder's *La Kermesse héroïque*. Prominence was given to the actors by having all the buildings in Flanders constructed at three-quarters size. He used scale models

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<sup>14</sup> For further comment on the logistics of filming the scenes in the four-walled room, see Marcel Carné, *La Vie à belle dents* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1989), pp. 106-7.



for the long shots of roofs and towers to lend a greater depth to the decor, and by altering the angles of buildings and sizes of characters, Meerson was able to create an 'other worldly' feel to Flanders. Through a similarly elaborate *trompe l'œil* effect, Trauner used the same technique for the decor of *Les Enfants du paradis* (1945). The opening and closing crowd scenes on the Boulevard du Temple were achieved by painting the last twenty metres of the set and employing child extras to equalise the sense of distorted perspective. For Jill Forbes, this method serves a dual purpose; not only does it 'enhance the exemplarity of the Boulevard' by depicting a singularly hyper-real Boulevard du Temple that is now more crowded than the original, but it also creates a set that 'resembles a memory embellished by time' to the extent that the technique heightens the emotional power of both referent (the real boulevard du Temple) and reference (Trauner's set).<sup>15</sup>

To make things appear more 'real' in film decor often requires a certain amount of cheating. An exaggeration of effects will result in a sacrifice of authenticity and a violation of orthodox architectural principles, but will ultimately lend a heightened degree of realism to the decor. Film often has a tendency to flatten surfaces, and as there is no on-screen relief, set designers are obliged to create relief by exaggerating and warping the decor.

In addition to forced perspective and *trompe l'œil* backdrops, poetic realist set designers also appropriated those decor techniques favoured by German Expressionist cinema. In several films, exemplified by *Das Kabinett des Doktors Caligari* (1919, henceforth *Caligari*), architectural and spatial logic was contorted to the point of abstraction. These disorientating and disassociative effects are clearly visible in poetic realist films directed by German *émigrés*. Raymond Durgnat has

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<sup>15</sup> Jill Forbes, *Les Enfants du paradis* (London: BFI, 1997), p. 21.

argued that German Expressionism possessed two design tendencies, the paroxystic and the decorative.<sup>16</sup> Whereas the decorative represents the decor as a whole, imbued with a strong visual and spatial presence, the paroxystic constitutes that sudden, violent visual imprint which assaults the audience's attention. Whether an angular staircase or brutal use of shadow, this paroxystic tendency highlighted the Expressionist disposition for punctuating the *mise en scène* with stark visual elements. French poetic realism was alert to such a design bent, and the *émigré* directors fused these paroxystic qualities into more realistic subject matter. For example, in both *Mollenard* (1937) and *Pièges* (1939), Robert Siodmak uses shadows, concentrated light sources and distorted perspective to connote his protagonist's fraught mental states. Victor Trivas's *Dans les rues* (1933) offered a murkier and more malign version of Paris than Clair's contemporaneous alternatives. Trivas not only broke from established convention by shooting several crucial scenes on location, but in his collaboration with set designer André Andrejew, he imbued the streets of Paris with a negative, threatening presence. In stark contrast to Clair's valorisation of the street in *Sous les toits de Paris* and *Quatorze juillet* as a site of community and common interaction, Trivas codifies the street as a site of fracture and breakdown.

French directors became increasingly influenced by the German visual style and adopted the same technique of imbuing the built environment with a sense of hidden menace. In *Crime et châtiment* (1935), Chenal searched for a stylised *mise en scène* to visually signify Raskolnikov's nightmares. The exaggerated angles and obliquity of Aimé Bazin's set design reflected his anguished mental state - the low ceiling which frames the murdered woman's body and the sunken archways into which

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<sup>16</sup> Raymond Durnat, *Films and Feelings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 103.



Pierre Blanchar presses himself are explicitly configured as malign spatial indices. Poetic realism is characterised by a decor which mirrors the protagonist's social marginalisation, and this marginalisation, both personal and social, is reflected in the design scheme. The decor literally imprisons Raskolnikov, crushing him not through its monumentality or instability, but through its persistent presence.

The artificiality of the studio set and the level of artistic control that the studio allowed facilitated this sense of menace inherent in the decor. Although location shooting was not uncommon, it was the process of hyperbolising certain elements within the studio-designed set which characterised poetic realist decor. The process of stripping the frame of unnecessary detail and refilling it with the meticulous selection and assimilation of reality symbols was a dominant characteristic of poetic realist set designers. For example, in Trauner's design scheme, the deliberate insignificance of the decor was fundamental in creating the reality effect and reinforcing a strong sense of place. Yet by choosing to reconstruct familiar *topos* (a hotel or an apartment block), he was able to inflect the recognisable with a high degree of hyperbolic design intensity. The *immeuble* in *Le Jour se lève* primarily conforms to a pattern of verisimilitude and of recognition, and yet by constructing it in forced perspective, placing the 'Dubo-Dubon-Dubonnet' advertising on its side and placing it at the confluence of three thoroughfares, Trauner imbues the decor with a strong visual and metaphorical charge. Although different in tone and subject matter from poetic realism, *A nous la liberté* and *La Grande illusion* also exemplify this design technique of reduction and hyperbolisation which distinguished 1930s poetic realism. The combination of a naturalistic setting infused with personal temperament typified both Meerson's and Eugène Lourié's work. In *A nous la liberté*, the use of strong geometric linearity and an Art Deco-style reliance upon

glass and steel imbues the factory with both a decorative and negative presence. Decorative because of the way in which Meerson integrates modernist architecture's inherent visuality with controlled light sources; negative because despite the illuminating nature of the decor, the rigid lines of the architecture in the factory and the proliferation of spatial impediments (such as doors, staircases and windows) resemble the prison from which Louis and Emile (Raymond Cordy and Henri Marchand) escape at the beginning of the film. In *La Grande illusion*, the design of von Rauffenstein's room and the objects within it are perfect resonators of Erich von Stroheim's personality. By exaggerating core elements of the design scheme, Lourié uses decor as a reflective and revelatory mechanism which can encapsulate and paraphrase the narrative concerns. In both films, the designers abolish incidental or non-essential details and exaggerate the remainder in the direction of either transparency or opacity.

Architecture has a finite spatiality, occupying a certain space and built to last a given time (at least a lifetime, often millennia). It is functional and has a connection to history insofar as it is conceived, planned, built and used by society. Film decor also has a finite spatiality, but its longevity is much shorter; a temporary construction lasting the length of the shoot. Although as functional as architecture, film decor is essentially ephemeral, remembered in the audience's mind after reflection. This was anticipated in the backlots of movie studios, where, as Tod Hackett discovered in *The Day of the Locust*, a myriad of incomplete buildings, half-constructed and half-demolished, remain in a permanent state of re-modification. This practice has undoubtedly dominated the Hollywood studio system, where sets and props are endlessly recycled and repositioned, functioning seamlessly as backdrop for melodrama, horror, *film noir* or western. Nearly every prop and set had been used

previously, and sets would rarely have been constructed with the current project in mind.<sup>17</sup> So while the film image has an infinite permanence - it can never be erased and its connection with history is assured due to its consecration in film histories and accessibility to successive generations of spectators - the film set is rapidly demolished once shooting is over. Ramirez's sub-section ultimately suggests that the *film image* is connected to architecture through its permanence and relationship to history, but in strictly material terms (what has been built), the *film decor* has the closest affiliation with architecture. The conclusion is that film decor is endowed with a dual function: 'ephemeral in its status as set, permanent in its status as image'.<sup>18</sup>

Applying Ramirez's taxonomy to poetic realist decor serves as an introductory understanding of both its general and specific visual and narrative properties. As a recognisable cinematic form, poetic realism emerged as the combination of documentary realism, architectural orthodoxy and distortion and the enhancement of the built space's poetic quality. Poetic realist sets were not conceived as 'added attractions that the audience might applaud'<sup>19</sup> but above all as verisimilitudinous spaces. The decor combined function with poetry and it was the intersection of these two qualities which was vital in maintaining the reality effect and grounding the spectator in a highly recognisable milieu. Hollywood sets, for all their purported 'realism', were frequently crushed beneath their own excessive stylisations;

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<sup>17</sup> Indeed, spotting the re-employment of Hollywood interior sets is a fascinating exercise. The gothic staircase from *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) returned the same year in *Cat People* and became a mainstay for several RKO 'haunted house' pictures for years afterwards.

<sup>18</sup> Affrons, p. 32. The dialectic draws inevitable comparisons with Baudelaire's observation that 'Le beau est fait d'un élément éternel, invariable, dont la quantité est excessivement difficile à déterminer, et d'un élément relatif, circonstanciel', in 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne' in Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Marcel A. Ruff (Paris: Seuil, 1968), pp. 546-65 (p. 550).

<sup>19</sup> Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 5.

conversely, it was the integrity inherent within the organic poetic realist design process which enabled a marrying of decor and mood.

### **The phenomenology of poetic realist decor**

How does the poetic realist set ‘work’? How does it persuade the audience that it is an accurate conceptualisation? From a phenomenological perspective, the cinematic sense of place is contingent upon three conditions: perception (we can see it), identification (we recognise it and are secure within it) and meaning (we grasp how the place relates to us in an emotional and practical sense). The following observations are by no means solely applicable to poetic realist cinema, but they do propose an entry point to an understanding of the importance placed upon the decor by 1930s set designers and directors:

- The set is the crux of recognition
- The set creates an air of authenticity
- The set establishes itself as the arena for event and interaction

### **The crux of recognition**

When Dudley Andrew claimed that poetic realism involves ‘the fundamental relation a film establishes and maintains with a contemporaneous audience, a relation, to be specific, that fosters immediacy, recognition and identification’<sup>20</sup>, he recognised how the poetic realist set is a cluster of tightly packed signs and symbols that the

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<sup>20</sup> Andrew, p. 326.

audience immediately recognise, anchoring them into the here and now. As much of our understanding of the world generally comes not from first-hand experience but from second-hand information, our perception of place is partly derived from cinematic representations. The degree to which this cinematic depiction of place succeeds depends on several factors: the proficiency with which the place is portrayed, the narrative and visual intentions of the director and set designer and the extent to which we have had personal knowledge of the place.

One way of making the set the crux of recognition is to create the ‘impression of reality’. Using Charles Sanders Peirce’s important trichotomy of icon-index-symbol, a film-maker may propose three kinds of signification: iconisation, indexicalisation and symbolisation.<sup>21</sup> In each case, the relationship between the signifier and the signified determines the type of signification and that the relationship may be one of either resemblance, causal connection, or conventional association. For instance, an icon is a sign by virtue of its visual likeness (a photograph or a statue); here the signifier resembles the signified. An index is a sign by virtue of a causal connection between the signifier and the signified. So smoke is an index of fire, because the latter causes the former. A symbol is perhaps the most complex of the signs because the links between the signifier and the signified must be ‘learned’. Any connections are rooted in cultural and social constructs and as such must be isolated, interpreted and understood. For example, the word ‘city’ and its pronunciation are abstract symbols referring to a populated urban place.

This schematic taxonomy can be applied to the opening sequence of *Hôtel du Nord*, which visualises a pre-existing construction: the eponymous hotel, bridge,

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<sup>21</sup> For a fuller understanding of Peirce’s trichotomy, see Peter Wollen, ‘The semiology of the cinema’, in Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), pp. 122-4.

canal and street in north-eastern Paris. The image is iconic because it resembles the actual Canal Saint-Martin and the Hôtel du Nord and can be represented as such. Because the film image is visually contiguous to a topographical image that the audience would have seen before, they equate what they see on screen as comparable to the original model. The image is representing to them what they know to exist already. The image is indexical because it has been caused by the technological cinematic process since the images of the hotel, bridge, canal and street have a causal connection with the material world. The image has been created by light reflecting off the 'real' image and bouncing onto the film stock which immortalises on film a representation of that image. The opening sequence may also be read as symbolic because the audience may decipher the bridge's dominance over the surrounding neighbourhood as a symbol of entrapment, narrative commencement or the architectural manifestation of community.

Although decor cannot solely be predicated upon the somewhat naive absolutism of Peirce's categorisation, the tripartite system is useful in introducing a mode of cinematic representation which requires the audience to suspend their disbelief. The success of a film's cinematic landscape depends most heavily on the supposed resemblance of the image to the real world, and for the audience to leave their world and identify with and enter into the on-screen landscape they must at the very least be presented with a visually contiguous space which conforms to their own experiences.

In poetic realism, this process of 'cinematic place' identification emanates from a sense of recognition based on previous experience of that place in different media and the careful arrangement of ascertainable signifiers. These signifiers were particularly crucial because they provided the decor with a strong foundational base,



imbuing the poetic realist sets with a powerful emotional charge. They were the reconfiguration of already recognisable iconographies embedded in the spectator's subconscious which conferred an extra dimension to the power of the decor. Long-disappeared or half-remembered places could be reconstituted on the screen, creating a psychic space for both protagonist and spectator. The beauty of the Carné-Trauner landscapes in particular hinges on the delicate application of McLuhan's notion of 'historical simultaneity' - the visual artefact of another era has been detached from its original context and employed as emotional shorthand in our own. Jill Forbes acknowledges as much in her study of *Les Enfants du paradis*, asserting that, 'The charm of Trauner's sets is the charm of recognition, the pleasure deriving from the fact that the physical environment is exactly as the viewer somehow always expected it to be, a second-level recreation.'<sup>22</sup> Poetic realist set design, Forbes decides, is a means for the spectator to be essentially shown not how a particular place was, but how they wish to remember it having been.

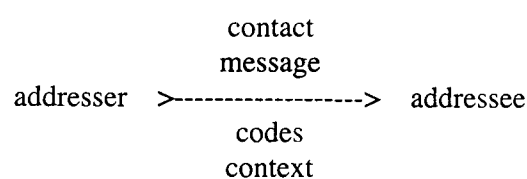
It seems axiomatic to regard set as an index to reality, or as the crux of recognition. The most successful films of this period are those in which the built environment plays an important role in the narrative, either as a site of nostalgia, or as an expressive crucible in which notions of the self and community are established and experimented upon. Vincendeau argues, 'Even the poorest movie lovingly recreates (and often embellishes) this particular decor, relying on a well-established iconography and familiar rituals of gestures and language deeply engrained in the

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<sup>22</sup> Forbes, p. 21.

national culture.’<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the set is an important structuring device; an architectural crutch enabling the audience to gain an impression of place. By appropriating traditional thematic iconographies and embellishing them with their own visual imprint, the director and the set designer are able to construct a familiar world (one which ‘fosters immediacy’) possessing distinctive elements that mark it out as an emotionally charged space. This process of drawing the audience into the cinematic environment could be achieved through the recurrence of stock visual signifiers. Whether an establishing shot of the *quartier* or continual images of the Canal St-Martin, these ‘sights’ are important memory stimulators which possess strong identities or prominent features and release second-level reconceptualisations of pre-existing spaces.

This mnemonic system conforms to a simplified diagram version of Jakobson’s communicative act:



The diagram refers to the six constituent factors that make up any speech act. All communication consists of a message, initiated by an addresser whose destination is an addressee. Nevertheless, the message requires a contact between addresser and addressee, be it oral, electronic or visual. The contact requires that communication

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<sup>23</sup> Ginette Vincendeau, ‘From the *bal populaire* to the casino: class and leisure in French films of the 1930s’, *Nottingham French Studies*, 31:2 (1992), pp. 52-70 (p. 53). Similarly, the recent success of *Le Fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulain* (2001) can be partly attributed to the way the film has successfully recycled the enduring *topoi* of poetic realist films and pandered to the audience’s notion of a mythopoeic Paris. The film’s publicity campaign focused on *Amélie* as an architectural blueprint for an Ur-Paris - an unattributed review of the film on the back of commemorative postcards declared that ‘[I]f Paris were destroyed tomorrow [...] archaeologists could reconstruct [it] to perfection from just a reel of *Amélie*.’

can only happen through shared knowledge. The message must be also formulated in the form of a code, whether through speech, numbers, writing, sound or image. These codes are in turn not isolated but are interwoven signs, and the addressee is obliged to decode what the addresser has encoded. The message must refer to a context, implicitly understood by both addresser and addressee, which enables the message to 'make sense'.

Although designed for literary forms of communication, the diagram clearly underlines how far the appreciation and assimilation of the communication (in this example, the film image) is a two-way process. The message has to be shared by the sender and the receiver; there needs to be a participated frame of reference and an underlying assumption that the recipient of the message will be competent enough to read it. Only through familiarity can the communicative act be effected, and the same is true of the interpretation of the cinematic image, or in the case of poetic realism, the reconceptualisation of a given space. In essence, Jakobson's diagram argues that the message alone cannot supply or sustain all of the meaning, for a great deal of communication derives from the context, the code and contact. 'Meaning' resides in the total act of communication.<sup>24</sup>

### The 'recognisable set': *Quatorze juillet*

With its blend of light romance and social realism, *Quatorze juillet* does not conform to the traditional definition of poetic realism as a pessimistic and claustrophobic narrative. Instead, with its use of popular song and neat resolution, the film is an

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<sup>24</sup> For further information on Jakobson's diagram, see Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuen, 1977), pp. 76-87.

episodic look at events leading up to Bastille Day in a working-class neighbourhood of Paris. Where the film does correspond to a certain strain of poetic realism is through the primacy of the set and the foregrounding of immediately distinguishable motifs which prepare the spectator for a certain kind of cinematic experience. The opening sequence is an important structuring device which privileges the space and fosters immediacy, recognition and identification. The set becomes the crux of recognition - the decorating of the buildings by the local residents with garlands, flags and lanterns is not only indicative of a time and place, but is a kind of *décor d'ambiance* that fulfils the reality effect before imbuing the decor with any symbolic resonance. The decoration seems a conscious attempt to clarify the rapport between the individual and the wider community, and also conforms to a universality with which the spectator would identify. This blending of micro- and macro-geographies and an awareness that personal experience of a given space can develop into a universal appreciation of it is heightened by the *mise en scène* - music, set and lighting all intertwine to create a familiar experience of a common Parisian space. Likewise, the slow pan around the square articulates a highly detailed sociological description which anchors the spectator to an accustomed environment. Architecturally, the spectator is primed to the importance of the stone steps. As the camera pans by, it pauses slightly, resting on the steps stretching to a vanishing point, imbuing them with a visual and dramaturgic importance. The 'Maison Léon' café also incorporates a stock iconography: signs such as 'téléphone' and 'plats à emporter' function as actuality devices, while the central presence of the café in the square underlines the space as the privileged focal point typical of much of 1930s French cinema. A cross-section of society is also introduced: children, young lovers, an old couple, a landlady, and a café owner. These figures all move at ease through

the space, closely connected to their environment, and they immediately ground the narrative in a familiarity. Clair seems to suggest that by making the space analogous to any working-class district of Paris, its universality is heightened, and so too, exponentially, is the audience's security and freedom within it.

### **An air of authenticity**

While preparing to film *Paris* in 1925 for MGM, Hollywood art director Cedric Gibbons had to return from the French capital with a book of photographs to prove to legendary producer Irving Thalberg that the love scene he was committed to include in the film should not take place next to a moonlit ocean. Thalberg's response highlights how, in Hollywood at least, authenticity was frequently sacrificed for aesthetic or commercial impact:

We can't cater to a handful of people who know Paris [...] Audiences only see about ten percent of what's on the screen anyway, and if they are watching your backgrounds instead of my actors the scene will be useless. Whatever you put there, they'll believe it.<sup>25</sup>

To establish a connection with the setting and an appreciation of its aesthetic value, there must be an authenticity; an extension of the set as a crux of recognition. Admittedly, the majority of American cinema-goers in 1925 would never have been to Paris and their lack of a geographical referencing point would justify in part Thalberg's illuminating rejoinder. Although Gibbons intrinsically sensed the need for verisimilitude and his place-making ability to be as accurate as possible, real

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<sup>25</sup> John Hambley and Patrick Downing, *Thames Television's The Art of Hollywood* (London: Thames Television, 1979), p. 58.

places cannot always be so willingly pressed into service.<sup>26</sup> The authenticity of 1930s set design was correspondingly underpinned by the meticulous organisation of documentary evidence. Many set designers relied on extensive documentation and the accumulation of many hundreds of photographs, sketches and contemporary illustrations on which to base their final decor. For Trauner, this documentation was ‘une béquille nécessaire qui nous permet de retrouver les éléments qui seront reconnus par les gens qui regardent nos décors’.<sup>27</sup>

For the decor to sustain its illusion of place, it must paradoxically remain authentic. In film, as in literature, the establishment of an identifiable setting is a strong preference in most viewers - we like to know where we are and we try to identify distinct evidence of when and where a thing happened. The 1930s spectator sought similar assurances, and for the most part, the set designs were mimetic reconstructions which lent an authenticity and a familiar atmosphere to the narrative. By re-creating existing conceptualisations of the urban landscape in their own style, French set designers could offer ‘a form of superior reality and a means of discovery’.<sup>28</sup> This ‘superior reality’ was the capacity to film those working-class milieux that had previously been inaccessible or ignored in previous cinematic depictions while the ‘means of discovery’ was, like the opening tracking shot of the Boulevard du Crime in *Les Enfants du paradis*, a way of ‘opening out’ the city, of making space transgressable and perceptible to all. At the heart of the decor, however, lay an established authenticity. Before the set design could begin to emit symbolic or metaphorical resonances, the decor required a grounding in authenticity. It was this grounding that arguably lent a greater capacity to the poetic realist

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<sup>26</sup> Gibbons was known in Hollywood as the art director who ‘put the glove on the mantelpiece’, not just because he was a stickler for detail, but also because his three-dimensional, constructed mantelpiece could now allow a real glove to be placed upon it.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Pierre Berthomé, *Alexandre Trauner: décors de cinéma* (Paris: Jade-Flammarion, 1988), p. 76.

designs - it was because the establishment of a recognisable milieu was invested with dramatic significance that poetic realism's narrativised decor assumed such lasting pre-eminence. The sets primarily combined a surface authenticity with an expressive dimension.

In his study of *Le Jour se lève*, Allen Thiher asserts that in both Flaubert's fiction and Carné's film, decor and objects are presented to both affirm the ontological weight of the world represented and also to function as signs that reflect narrative concerns. This ontological weight can be defined simply to mean the 'being there-ness' of the object and its position in the frame. By conforming to general mimetic practice, the typicality of the objects and decor then trigger an identification with what Thiher designates the 'sociological average', or the denotation of a familiar reality easily identifiable to the spectator.<sup>29</sup> In *Le Jour se lève*, the Dubonnet advertisement, the haphazard electric wires and the cobblestones constitute this sociological average. Like the cruxes of recognition in *Quatorze juillet* (staircase, café, flag), these are all objects which represent the typicality of a time and place and underpin the lower level of cinematic function through a process of denotation. Only once the director has foregrounded the denotative essence of these objects can they then begin to emit symbolic connotations. Consequently, the objects in François's room serve as authentic sociological indices of his character, and once assimilated by the spectator and having fulfilled their denotative aspect, they can then begin to emanate symbolic resonances.

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<sup>28</sup> Forbes, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> Allen Thiher, *The Cinematic Muse: Critical Studies in the History of French Cinema*, (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1979), p. 121.

## The 'authentic set': *La Kermesse héroïque*

Referring to Meerson's work in the 1930s, Léon Barsacq concluded that 'authenticité' rather than 'réalisme' was deemed a better definition of his work.<sup>30</sup> It was not that the decor for *La Kermesse héroïque* was not 'real' - Meerson spent months travelling around northern Europe researching in museums, accumulating extensive documentation and making preparatory sketches - but that the final decor never sacrificed poetry for a more transparent rendering of the real. Meerson's decor was not *realistic*, because he employed forced perspective, scale models and accentuated decor fragments, but *authentic*, because he synthesised this documentary research with a certain amount of artistic licence. He created an authentic look to seventeenth-century Flanders by carefully selecting those elements that would do most to activate the reality effect and impose a level of authenticity on top of a stylised reproduction of an existing space. For Jean Mitry, Meerson's recreation of Boom was hyper-real, 'plus authentique et plus vraie que les modèles dont elle s'inspire'.<sup>31</sup> The set design, however faithful to engravings or illustrations, was ultimately the authentic vision of a designer who recognised the constraints of primary realism and sought to synthesise documentation to an accentuated visual style. This juxtaposition became increasingly commonplace in 1930s set design and became the dominant decor practice of poetic realism. For Feyder and Meerson, documentation could never be an all-binding methodology which locked the designer into a rigidly pre-conceived visual plan. Instead it was a *béquille*, a springboard off which director and designer could propel their work into the poetic

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<sup>30</sup> Léon Barsacq, *Le Décor de film* (Paris: Seghers, 1970), p. 61.

<sup>31</sup> Jean Mitry, *Histoire du cinéma: Art et Industrie*, 5 vols. (Paris: Jean-Pierre Delarge, 1980), IV: 1930-40, p. 584.



by remaining faithful to architectural orthodoxy and second-degree realism. By inserting authentic objects, decor or architectural fragments into the design scheme, the denotative level of cinematic identification would be underpinned and then symbolic resonances introduced.

### **An arena for event and interaction**

Any form of story telling is always concerned with the individual in some sort of relationship to their immediate socio-cultural environment. Conventionalised settings and the manner in which these settings are portrayed produce a common meaning and reaction in the audience. In a 1938 *Commune* article, Claude Aveline argued that a film's primary role was to describe a milieu that fundamentally controlled the protagonists: 'Que les individus s'y fondent ou s'y opposent, qu'ils le subissent, l'acceptent ou qu'ils tentent de lui résister, il règne sur tout.'<sup>32</sup> Once constructed, the set in 1930s poetic realism becomes not only the backdrop for human interaction and a dramaturgical arena for the playing out of personal and community forces, but also a milieu which exerts a benign or malign influence on the individual. Acknowledging that the reciprocity between character and milieu is a thematic consistency in Zola's novels, Tonard clearly states the way in which décor and setting assume ontological, as well as functional, importance:

Ces lieux ne sont pas de simples 'décors' posés là à des fins purement scéniques ou esthétiques. Les lieux font corps avec les personnages au point de posséder, par le biais de personnifications et de métaphores, des traits de caractère humain.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Claude Aveline, 'Films de milieux', *Commune*, 56 (April 1938), p. 1020.

<sup>33</sup> Jean-François Tonard, *Thématique et symbolique de l'espace clos dans le cycle des Rougon-Macquart d'Emile Zola* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 2.

Similarly, far from being a neutral container of action, poetic realist decor is never passive. Instead, emotion is architecturalised and the set anthropomorphises into a powerful signifier of state of mind. The novel has always employed description to propel the narrative into the realms of metaphor or allegory, with naturalist fiction in particular using description of place and architecture as oblique mirrors of character or event (for example, the vivid representation of London in the opening of *Bleak House* or the varied collection of houses in *La Cousine Bette*). Cinematic set design, like the fresh page, is a similar blank canvas onto which the designer can inscribe their own psychological dimensions and imbue architecture with individual impressions and allusions. Christina Kennedy has noted that the environment is crucial to the kind of self we create ‘through the opportunities it affords us and the meanings we impart to our transactions with it’.<sup>34</sup> In her analysis of *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), she refers to the mutuality of self and space and the way in which a person-environment interdependence is created by a succession of ‘image-events’. These ‘image-events’ are defined as a series of shots that distort or enhance the rhythm of a film so that a basic rapport can be created between the spectator and the film-maker.<sup>35</sup> Her examples include the film’s expansive desert vistas, which invite the viewer to make mental connections between the protagonist and his environment. Likewise, in the opening sequence of *Pépé le Moko*, the spectator’s anchoring into the Casbah milieu is highly dependent upon the creation of a realistic environment and the introduction of the documentary-style montage. The sequence immediately draws the audience into the spatial nexus of the Casbah, through a rapid intertwining of picture-postcard iconography, impassive voice-over and *cinéma-vérité* montage.

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<sup>34</sup> Christina B. Kennedy, ‘The Myth of Heroism: Man and Desert in *Lawrence of Arabia*’, in *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle*, ed. by Stuart C. Aitken and Leo E. Zonn, (Lanham, MD: Rowmann and Littlefield, 1994), pp. 161-79 (pp. 162-3).

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 164.

Although one might broadly agree with David Bordwell's assertion that in film 'character takes precedence over place'<sup>36</sup>, the statement is less sustainable when examining poetic realist films. Frequently, it is the built set which assumes the greater influence in the narrative, either as the visual focal point for the film or the prime arena for interaction. The creation of an authentic space is crucial not just for the impact of the narrative, but also to ground the spectator in a recognisable milieu. Poetic realism relies upon the audience's involvement in the narrative being heightened and mediated through an overwhelming sense of place. Communal spaces such as the hotel or the café assume prime significance in the films of the 1930s, as these domestic milieux act as a causal link between action and spectator. This causality is exemplified in films such as *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* or *Hôtel du Nord*, where the film-maker can anchor the viewer into the diegetic space through the repetition of familiar images and effect a person-environment intersection.

This intersection was frequently achieved through a confluence of metonymy and metaphor. By presenting a part to stand for a whole, the film-maker could delineate his dramaturgical arena and foreground the typical human-environment events that would take place in the space. For example, the squares in *Sous les toits de Paris*, *Quatorze juillet* and *Hôtel du Nord* act firstly as metonyms, where the notion of community and the homogeneity of the Parisian *quartier* is presented by depicting its most recognisable communal space to function as the whole and assume a more universal significance. Once established, these metonyms then function as metaphor, where the 'parts of the whole' (in this case, a town square) come to stand

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<sup>36</sup> David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classic Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 51. Bordwell contends that traditionally, the exposition of space is attributed the least amount of screen time. An establishing shot will on average never last for longer than twenty to thirty seconds, because by this point character has taken over narration.

for more culturally loaded notions of community and class solidarity. Readings of individual films reveal how several conform to and hinge upon this metonymy/metaphor dialectic in consolidating the person-environment nexus - in *Le Jour se lève*, the objects in François's room are metonymic of his personality while the denuded *immeuble* metaphorises François's isolation. In both cases, the decor functions as an arena for human interaction, both individually in the room, where the objects bind François to his immediate environment, and collectively in the *immeuble*, which forms the architectural and societal focal point of the town. Similarly, the courtyard in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* is a simultaneous metonym for a working-class community and a metaphor for Renoir's notion of tightly bound collective action. In both films, the part stands for the whole and the audience need only see the privileged spaces of the *immeuble* or the courtyard to grasp the importance of these individual arenas of interaction.

### **The 'interactive set': *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange***

The meaning of *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* is embedded within its very architecture. Renoir and his set designer Jean Castanier reproduce in height, depth and intricate detail a characteristic Parisian courtyard that becomes the focal point for all the community's social activities. The four-sided set, itself a major break from conventional cinematic practice, permits an explicit focalisation of the narrative - embedded in the set design is the concierge's apartment, the laundry, the staircase, the composing room and Batala's office, and during the film several communal events and confrontations are played out in these spaces. It is the courtyard from which all of these ancillary spaces radiate and the courtyard which functions as the

spatial embodiment of the community. Noting that the courtyard is the point to which all the individual and communal events converge, Bazin argued that it is through the community's interaction 'avec la cour' which defines and differentiates them.<sup>37</sup> The architecture facilitates the use of Renoir's trademark cinematic grammar - deep-focus shots across the courtyard can isolate not just one or two individuals but can situate them in relation to the wider community while without the distortion of artificial editing, the camera can accommodate complex negotiations between actors and decor.

It has become traditional to regard the built environment in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* as a central factor in the development of the narrative and an unmistakable presence in the drama. Most crucially, poetic realist set design was in tune with the wider organic community in which everything was democratised. There is a synthesis between the sense of place (set-as-architecture), the particular experience of a certain person in a certain place (set-as-mirror) and a spirit of place, namely the combination of several of these individual experiences into a community whole (set-as-spatial metaphor).

### **Poetic realism: a connotative decor**

There are two different levels of signification in popular culture - denotation and connotation. The most basic level of signification is denotation, or something possessing a literal orthodox meaning: leaves falling from trees in September denotes the onset of autumn, or a tracking shot through Monument Valley at the opening of a John Ford film denotes that the film is to be a western. On the second

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<sup>37</sup> André Bazin, *Jean Renoir* (Paris: Lebovici, 1989), p. 40.

level, signs operate in a different way to create a connotative value, whereby the sign is attributed meanings which are associated with the prevailing dominant culture: that same opening tracking shot of the Ford western will connote multiple meanings such as isolation, the dominance of the landscape over the human figure or the imminent arrival of John Wayne. The iconography of poetic realism is predicated on a tight entwining of both the connotative and denotative elements of the film image. For example, poetic realism repeatedly employs tight framing and constrictive angles to connote the haphazardness of protagonist and narrative. William Cameron Menzies once suggested that:

[I]f the mood of the scene calls for violence and melodramatic action, the arrangement of the principal lines of the composition would be very extreme, with many straight lines and extreme angles. The point of view would be extreme, either very low or very high [...] The values or masses could be simple and mostly in a low key, with violent highlights [...] In tragedy or pathos, or any scene photographed in a low key, the setting is often designed with a low ceiling, giving a feeling of depression.<sup>38</sup>

The visual motifs implied by Menzies run throughout the discourse of poetic realist set design, underlining the importance of carefully placed visual signifiers within the frame to connote meaning in a powerfully systematic fashion.

The presence of a connotative *mise en scène* as one of its defining features conceptualises poetic realism as a logical development of 1920s German Expressionism. Defined as an ‘expressiveness of style by means of exaggerations and distortions of line and tone,’ and ‘a deliberate abandonment of naturalism in favour of a simplified style which should carry far greater emotional impact’<sup>39</sup>, Expressionist films proposed a connotative decor in which spatial haphazardness,

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<sup>38</sup> William Cameron Menzies, ‘Pictorial Beauty in the Photoplay’, in *Hollywood Directors: 1914-1940*, ed. by Richard Koszarski (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 238-51 (p. 244).

<sup>39</sup> Paul and Linda Murray, *Dictionary of Art and Artists* (London: St. James, 1990), p. 9.

fractured geographies and unseen forces in the metropolis were all reflected in the set design.

Arguing that the decor in 1920s German cinema resembled a tapestry of hieroglyphics which revealed mental states in terms of architecture, Lotte Eisner perceived how the settings in German Expressionism could express inner experience and suffuse the urban environment with emotions and states of mind. Her term *Landschaft mit Seele*, or 'landscape imbued with soul', used to describe the cumulative and cognitive effect of these Expressionist sets is arguably applicable to the Carné-Trauner collaborations.<sup>40</sup> Like the jagged angles and architectural abstractions in *Caligari*, spatial haphazardness and dislocation in poetic realism could be embodied in the tapestry of hieroglyphs of a claustrophobic courtyard, an isolated apartment building or a fog-bound port.

Likewise, obliquity and stylisation in poetic realism reinforce narrative concerns. Through this distorted feeling for landscape, poetic realist set designers recognise the importance of asymmetry and off-centredness as compositional elements. Space is sliced up, and the tight framing of the characters mirror their own moral or emotional disintegration. This tight framing within the city influences the human psyche and enhances the emotional valences of the film. The fog in *Le Quai des brumes* metaphorically indicates the essential disjointed and fractured nature of the Le Havre streets as well as the inner turmoil of the characters, while in *La Bête humaine*, the establishing shots of the Le Havre skyline are stark juxtapositions of expressionistic angles and impressionistic conceptions of urban space. Cranes, scaffolds, pylons and railway lines dominate the frame, placing the spectator in a visually coherent

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<sup>40</sup> Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. by Roger Greaves (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), p. 151.

and spatially contiguous environment from the outset, but also offering architectural symbols of entrapment and force.

It is through this combination of a narrativised decor and a reliance upon short-hand visual signifiers that poetic realist design may be deemed connotative. Viewed in the terms of a decor reflecting the separate and disconnected nature of urban living, the set mirrors a breakdown in the external world. Referring to fractured subjectivities in German Expressionism, Wilhelm Worringer observed that:

It is because [man] stands so lost and spiritually helpless amidst the things of the external world, because he experiences only obscurity and caprice in the inter-connection and flux of the phenomena of the external world, that the urge is so strong in him to divest the things of the external world of their caprice and obscurity in the world picture and to impart to them a value of necessity and a value of regularity.<sup>41</sup>

Reflected in the architecture and spatial configurations of the design scheme, this disassociative nature of poetic realism is epitomised by the 'inter-connection and flux of the phenomena of the external world'. The protagonist is left in a state of perpetual drift, exacerbated by an inability to identify with a personal space, while the seeming familiarity of those objects around them are undermined by their malign or negative associations. Much has been written about Jean Gabin's status in the cinema of the 1930s and how, as the star, he is the privileged recipient of being centre stage.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, it is primarily Gabin who 'stands so lost and spiritually helpless' in much of poetic realist cinema. Both director and designer frequently make him the recurrent object of this transferral of emotion from the external world to the microcosm of the set. Subjected to a form of urban schizophrenia, Gabin represents on the one hand vulnerability and passivity and on the other a barely

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<sup>41</sup> In Richard Burdick Byrne, 'German Cinematic Expressionism: 1919-1924' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 1962), p. 207.

<sup>42</sup> See Ginette Vincendeau, 'Community, Nostalgia and the Spectacle of Masculinity', *Screen*, 26:6 (1985), pp. 18-38.



concealed eroticised rage. The chiaroscuro lighting and shadowy set design that dominate so many of the films of Duvivier, Grémillon and Carné often express this duality within Gabin's living space and his personality. The recurring expressionist technique of a thin band of light on his eyes, offset by the semi-darkness of the rest of the frame, conveyed particular states of mind, while the monochrome shadings of his milieu was a potent metaphor for the duality of his personality. Bayles suggests that poetic realism's 'grisaille', which frequently renders the edge of the frame indistinct, is 'a striking visual correlate for the instability of object relations'.<sup>43</sup> Gabin encapsulates the poetic realist character who exists in an obscure environment which implies 'a partial dissolution of the limits between subject and object'.<sup>44</sup> The decor functions as a metaphor for interior rites of passage, literally imprisoning or crushing the individual. Built space is the backdrop for personal struggle and the narrative unravels within it and within this synthetic framework, issues of social fracture and unstable identity are played out. The urban landscape is animated to the extent that place becomes not just narrative spectacle or a signifier of the film's subject but a metaphor for the very state of mind of the protagonist.

Gabin is frequently depicted as autonomous and independent, in that the level of stardom conferred upon him and the amount of screen time and 'centre stage'-ness he is allocated far exceeds that of his diegetic community. Nevertheless, the positionality of the actor within the built environment is highly significant in poetic realism and increases the concept of disassociation. The spatial configurations of poetic realist cinema inextricably lock Gabin into the dramatic fiction - Carné, Renoir and Duvivier's narratives present him as *coincé* in his environment. Gates,

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<sup>43</sup> Janette Kay Bayles, 'Figuring the Object: Politics, Aesthetics and the Crisis of National Identity in Interwar French Literature and Cinema' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 1999), p. 194.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p. 194.

walls and other enclave spaces function as physical barriers regulating his access to and from different spaces. In our first appearances of him in *Le Jour se lève*, he is wrapped in a protective suit in the sand-blasting workshop; similarly, in *Pépé le Moko* Vincendeau has noted how the positioning of the walls and arches in the Casbah securely lock P  p   into his environment and how the tight framing and camera movement ‘produce an extraordinary tension as well as a ‘reality effect’ which anchors the spectator’s identification’.<sup>45</sup> These *espaces clos* proliferate in Gabin’s poetic realist films. Although the action frequently takes place in sites initially characterised as welcoming havens - hotel rooms, courtyards and caf  s - they are repeatedly charged with a malign, debilitating power. In *P  p   le Moko*, the exotic and erotic space of the Casbah is undercut by motifs of claustrophobia and entrapment, in *Le Quai des brumes*, the dock skyline of cranes and scaffolds offers an oblique comment on the skewed emotions of the Gabin character, and in *Gueule d’amour*, he is frequently framed behind closed window or curtains, or filmed from the inside, looking out through slatted blinds or bars. The psychological acuteness of such metaphors is a telling feature of poetic realist decor and the visual motifs which propel the narrative due largely to the subtlety of the designer’s aesthetic vocabulary will be explored more fully in Chapter 6.

### **Connotative design: *Le Jour se l  ve***

Designated the masterpiece of European poetic realism by Mitry, *Le Jour se l  ve* represents the apogee of a narrativised and connotative set design. In the film’s opening intertitles, we are introduced to Fran  ois (Jean Gabin) ‘enferm  , assi  g  

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<sup>45</sup> Ginette Vincendeau, *P  p   Le Moko* (London: BFI, 1998), p. 17.

dans une chambre'. After having killed Valentin (Jules Berry), François barricades himself into his room at the top of an apartment block. This space has immediately been made significant by Trauner's set design, firmly 'dressé contre le ciel'.<sup>46</sup> It is a liminal set - it opens the film and proposes the possibility of narrative expectations, as evidenced by the film's first image of two carhorses entering the square, symbolising spectatorial entry into the narrative arena. By being constructed at the confluence of three streets, the apartment block is immediately foregrounded as the key action space for the film, becoming a site of spectacle not only for the viewer but also for the diegetic community. Its monumentality is heightened by the fact that it is the only tall building in the frame, it is located at a junction, automatically increasing its spatial prominence, and it towers over the largely denuded townscape, imbuing the construct with a surreal atmosphere. In her essay on architecture in avant-garde films, Maureen Turim refers to the capacity of architecture to define the space of cities both physically and metaphorically. She argues that no inscription of architecture produces so dramatic a delineation of the cityscape 'as does the monument whose utility is often limited to the symbolic register and whose frequent placement at intersections of urban thoroughfares commands the multiple points of passage and perspective'.<sup>47</sup> What Turim seems to be suggesting is that monumentality and representation are interlinked; that the symbolic register of the landmark comes to represent not just a certain part of the city but also the very area it overlooks. By setting up a contrast between the *immeuble* and the rest of the surrounding urban structures, the former's prominence is accentuated, and its status as landmark consecrated. Consequently, from the opening shot of the film, the

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<sup>46</sup> André Bazin, *Le Cinéma français de la Libération à la Nouvelle Vague (1945-1958)*, comp. Jean Narboni (Paris: Petite Bibliothèque des Cahiers du cinéma, 1998), p. 92.

<sup>47</sup> Maureen Turim, 'The Displacement of Architecture in Avant-Garde Films', *Iris*, 12 (1991), pp. 25-38 (p. 32).

audience is made aware of the importance of this authentic urban space. This fetishisation of the monument is continued into the final scenes, when we see several long shots of François shouting down to the crowd.

When Carné's camera shoots down five flights of the winding staircase after the murder in *Le Jour se lève*, the 'vertical tunnel'<sup>48</sup> is an exact spatial reflection of François's vertiginous state of mind. This is a similar technique to the one used by Hitchcock in the bell-tower at the end of *Vertigo* (1958) in which staircases metaphorically refer to James Stewart's state of mind. The effect is the same here, where the staircase not only connotes a sense of community but also at the same time charges the space with a dynamism when several heads appear around the staircase banister. The peering heads may indicate an initial reaction to the gunshot, but also to further inscribe the notion of community and social cohesion that the Gabin character lacks. Yet there is an ambivalent presentation in these opening sequences - there is a community being presented, but it is not the welcoming and inclusive one of, say, *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, but instead one fraught with paranoia and suspicion. The staircase and the shot through the banisters are also important because they establish the leitmotif of the film as imprisonment and entrapment. Already attuned to this explicit meaning through the figure of the woman walking down the stairs holding a birdcage, the audience is conscious of a set freighted with powerful literal and extra-literal resonance.

Gabin seen in long shot is a recurrent connotative technique in *Le Jour se lève*. As a structuring device in establishing distance and isolation (in the same way that paintings offer a view of deep space by placing a viewer in the foreground), the long shot has an establishing function by locating an individual or a group in the wider

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<sup>48</sup> Andrew, p. 187.

landscape. The long shot can diminish human scale through an emphasis on the monumentality of the natural or built landscape such as the final scene when François shouts out of his window down at the crowd of onlookers below. This scene is important in highlighting how Carné's use of the long-shot enables the audience to comprehend François's fractured psyche. By opening up the screen to include all the visual elements in the frame, the human-environment nexus is strengthened and we can see the protagonist alone in his space. The repetition of the long shot/reverse shot is also important because it connotes François's descent into schizophrenia and detachment from reality and demonstrates the spatial and emotional distance between François and the rest of the working class who constitute his immediate environment. The urban space has been transformed into a battleground (underlined by the riot police attempting to disperse the crowd) in which the site of refuge and community has been distorted.

Carné's mobile camera frequently incorporates a set of images into the narrative. These shots of imposing buildings or urban landscapes can be re-inserted back into the narrative and function as establishing or point-of-view shots. For example, the narrative can appropriate the space it occupies because the mobile camera effectively stitches place and person together through rapid cutting, abrupt zoom or gentle panning in. Carné's *mise en scène* renders perfectly the feeling of domination by decor in *Le Jour se lève* where, as a result of their geometric placing, the actors are constantly at the mercy of the built set. The *immeuble* is configured as the focal point for the audience, and the reaction shots towards it when François (Jean Gabin) is shouting down from the window privilege the set as the point of convergence for the diegetic community.

The sequence can be broken down into six shots:

SHOT	DESCRIPTION OF SHOT	LENGTH OF SHOT
1	François at window (medium shot)	7 secs.
2	man and woman looking out of window of La Ruche Hotel (medium shot)	1 sec.
3	woman shielding eyes from sun looking out of window (medium close-up)	1 sec.
4	<i>immeuble</i> (medium-long shot)	1 sec.
5	<i>immeuble</i> (long-shot)	1 sec.
6	François at window (medium-shot)	4 secs.

In this sequence, the movement from one image to the next imbues the *immeuble* with increasing narrative significance and dramatic purpose. The final long-shot places the individual and the group in their environment, figures in this denuded landscape. Yet the key sequence is shot 2 and 3. What exactly are the couple and the woman looking at? The audience has been primed to see François as the object of the gaze - it is he who has been shouting before shot 1, and his presence bookends the sequence. However, the object of the gaze may legitimately be the *immeuble* given its geographical and visual primacy in the narrative and its dominant position in shots 4 and 5. As the focal point of the community, François and the building have become symbiotically linked.

When François commits suicide, the final shot is of a room in which tables and chairs are overturned, the mirror smashed and bed unmade; set and prop have anthropomorphised to reflect the mental state of its occupier, providing the aptest symbol for François's degeneration. The tracking back by Carné's camera from a fixed vantage point reasserts the power of the individual objects and synthesises

them with the wider environment. The gradual camera movement does, as Turk claims, suggest an intimate 'retreat and withdrawal' but not, I think, some kind of 'symbolic anticipation of France's acceptance of defeat in World War II'.<sup>49</sup> Instead, by simply presenting those objects that had signified François's existence throughout the film in a context devoid of any extra-literal meaning, this widening of viewpoint by the camera privileges all the objects in the room, instead of concentrating on just one. Through this process of unmediated foregrounding, the camera movement acts as a metaphor for the overall unsustainability of those individual objects and the ephemerality of their symbolic power within the confines of François's room.

Throughout the film, Carné's tight framing has depicted François as *coincé* in his milieu, a comment lent credence by the director's recollection that: 'Il était indispensable pour la crédibilité de l'intrigue que le dernier étage de l'immeuble habité par le héros de l'histoire soit inaccessible et que, par conséquent, sa construction domine toutes les maisons des alentours.'<sup>50</sup> This reference to the claustrophobia of domestic space is a recurrent image in the film - by placing the wardrobe against the door, François is not barricading himself in temporarily, but walling himself in permanently. This confirms Carné's entreaty to Trauner in the pre-production stages of the film for 'un décor absolument clos afin de donner l'impression d'un homme muré en quelque sorte dans cette chambre, où il passait sa dernière nuit à l'image d'un condamné à mort dans sa cellule'.<sup>51</sup> David Thomson once wrote that Hitchcock was 'squeamish to the point of agoraphobia with real settings and places' and insisted upon 'sets that fit the other definition of the word -

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<sup>49</sup> Edward Baron Turk, *Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 158.

<sup>50</sup> Carné, *La Vie à belle dents*, p. 106.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 107.

rigid, enclosing, as with traps that are set'.<sup>52</sup> This observation is apposite for the Carné-Trauner collaboration which exemplifies the tradition of closed film-making explored in Chapter 4. Trauner's sets are like 'traps that are set' because they architecturally and figuratively represent *huis clos*. It was Trauner who persuaded the producers of *Le Jour se lève* that François needed to be isolated on the fifth floor of the *immeuble*. The original plan was to have had François living on the first floor, but this would have dissipated all elements of suspense and isolation and would scarcely have provided an adequate architectural signifier for François's mental state.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

Poetic realist decor promised an integrity and an authenticity which participated in the action and mirrored the emotion of the narrative. Andrew contrasts these nuanced poetic realist sets with Hollywood decor, which instead remain a supplementary addition to the narrative or star actor. These sets are the sort that 'that the audience might applaud, as when the curtain goes up at the overture of an opera'.<sup>54</sup> Poetic realism also often relied upon a 'décor-vedette', but this was always subservient to the criteria of film architecture: proportion, character and harmony

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<sup>52</sup> David Thomson, 'The Art of the Art Director', *American Film*, 2:4 (1977), pp. 12-20 (p. 18).

<sup>53</sup> When the film was inevitably remade in Hollywood in 1946 as *The Long Night*, set designer Eugène Lourié constructed an apartment block in which the François character (Henry Fonda) lived on the first floor. Trauner attributed the failure of the film to this architectural decision, which did not correspond to the narrative trajectory or Fonda's psychological state. See Michel Ciment and Isabelle Jordan, 'Entretien avec Alexandre Trauner (1)', *Positif*, 223 (October 1979), pp. 4-19 (pp. 14-16).

<sup>54</sup> Andrew, p. 5.



and functioned as an emotional and mental amplifier of the narrative concerns.<sup>55</sup> The set becomes a *joueur*; through a stylised *mise en scène* characters are mirrored and reflected in their own surroundings, conforming to Bazin's observation that 'le décor coopère tout autant que le jeu de l'acteur à justifier les situations, à expliquer les personnages et à fonder la crédibilité de l'action'.<sup>56</sup>

Although neither *Quatorze juillet*, *La Kermesse héroïque* nor *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* conform to the dark, pessimistic strand of poetic realism outlined in the previous chapter, the films are highly representative of a poetic realist decor in two ways: firstly, they propose a socially oriented community populated by stock characters and recognisable visual signifiers which typify the populist axis of 1930s poetic realism. Secondly, the design scheme for these films is conceived virtually identically to that of, say, *Le Quai des brumes*. With an authentic foundation established, stylisation can be applied onto the decor, imbuing it with a dramatic role. Poetic realist sets were necessarily subject to architectural orthodoxy, for without the basic skeleton of the set, there could be no opportunity to reflect the mood of the protagonist or to amplify the narrative concerns. Although it may seem paradoxical to equate cinema (that most mimetic of art forms) with architecture (an art charged with the creation of a new reality), poetic realism relied upon the continual intersection of the two - the depiction of a verisimilitudinous architectural space followed by the stylisation of it into a poetic symbol. What the set designer created was an illusion to be registered in the subconscious mind of the audience and

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<sup>55</sup> This debate over the performativity of sets and whether they can be read as entities in themselves is similar to arguments over the role of costume in film. Like decor, costume can be an *aide-mémoire* designed to provoke a particular association. Stella Bruzzi recognises the function of clothing as 'not entirely dependent on the structures of narrative and character for signification.' (Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and identity in the movies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. xvi.

<sup>56</sup> Bazin, *Le Cinéma français*, p. 96.

the intimation of a world beyond the immediate confines of the set. This interpretation of the world rather than a reproduction of it could then be intensified through a variety of techniques - forced perspective, establishing shots or pictorial insertings.

The next chapter will examine the working methods and practices of 1930s set designers and explore the ways in which the designers conceived poetic realist set design not only as a container of action but as something to arrest the spectator's attention. Inflecting the visual look of the film with a definitive style was characteristic of poetic realism, as was the conceptualisation and construction of decor which allied highly personal interpretations with minutely detailed exteriors. Any attempt to account for their visual primacy and their ability to 'speak' the narrative must necessarily begin by considering the contribution of the set designer.

### Chapter 3 - 'Fabriqué mais pas faux': 1930s design practice

If it is in model-making that the architect resembles the set designer, it is in myth-making that the set designer becomes an architect of the imagination, mobilising a capacity to figure a potential reality.<sup>1</sup>

The artistic value of innumerable productions would be greatly enhanced if more producers would take the art director fully into their confidence during the planning of a film.<sup>2</sup>

What exactly do set designers do? Do they choose the locations where the film will be set? Do they oversee the assimilation of the furniture and objects used in the sets? Do they design and co-ordinate the construction of decor fragments when they are needed? Do they design the storyboards that illustrate the coherence of the shooting script? For William Cameron Menzies, designers must do all of these things; they should be 'a "Jack of all trades"'<sup>3</sup>, skilled at marshalling all the resources at their disposal and charged with focusing on the three-dimensional realm of the movie. Catherine Surowiec goes a step further, arguing that the consummate set designer is a combination of 'artist, architect, visionary and overseer'.<sup>4</sup> Nowhere is this more apparent than in 1930s poetic realism where the set designer enjoyed a privileged relationship with the director, conferring together during the preparation and shooting of the film. This reciprocity between director and designer was symptomatic of the working practices of 1930s French cinema, where, unlike the rigidly centralised, vertical division of labour of the Hollywood studios, the fragmented production strategy in France favoured a climate of collaboration out of which developed such enduring artistic teams as Carné-Prévert-

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Forbes, 'Paris, Paris', *Sight and Sound*, 57:2 (1988), pp. 111-4 (p.111).

<sup>2</sup> Vincent Korda, 'The Artist and the Film', *Sight and Sound*, 3, Spring 1934, pp. 13-15, partially repr. in Christopher Frayling, *Things to Come* (London: BFI, 1995), pp. 34-5 (p.35).

<sup>3</sup> In Frayling, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine A. Surowiec, *Accent on Design: Four European Art Directors* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 4.

Trauner and Duvivier-Spaak-Krauss.

This chapter will endeavour to provide a basic understanding of the role of the poetic realist set designer and examine the different working methods they employ to create the familiar iconographies of this movement. After the end of World War Two, when Eugène Lourié emigrated to America, he commented on the way in which Hollywood set designers would remain at the same studios throughout their professional lives, driven less by personal ambition or experimentation than by a loyalty to the studio. This, he argued, was the antithesis to the French system, in which designers 'tried hard to work with some preferred directors or choose films interesting in content or visual ambience.'<sup>5</sup> The chapter intends to highlight that these enduring alliances were not produced entirely out of studio contractual obligations, but, as Elliot Stein has suggested, resulted from 'compatibilities of directorial and architectural style'<sup>6</sup> which can be identified across a range of films.

However, any attempt to accurately conceptualise the role of the poetic realist set designer has always been hampered by a paucity of critical literature and a reticence by designers to 'explain their craft'. That the set designer is charged with creating poetic realism's recognisable iconographies and expressive environments is axiomatic, but they are generally afforded only passing reference in most histories of cinema. Indeed, the mysterious veil hanging over the magnitude of the set designer's role in the film-making process is a general trend. According to Ephraim Katz, although the designer may dominate the visual quality of a film, they have

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<sup>5</sup> Eugène Lourié, *My Work in Films* (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> Elliott Stein, 'Filmographies of Art Directors and Production Designers', in Léon Barsacq, *Caligari's Cabinet and Other Grand Illusions: A History of Film Design*, ed. and rev. by Elliot Stein, trans. by Michael Bullock (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), p. 195. Stein and Bullock translate around half of Barsacq's *Le Décor de film*, and then Stein adds a supplementary chapter on the history of art directors and production designers.

always been ‘the most underrated of cinema artists’<sup>7</sup>, while for Corliss and Clarens they remain the ‘most distinguished and least acknowledged’ of technicians.<sup>8</sup>

The reasons for this disregard are several. There is an enduring problem of nomenclature. The director directs, the actor acts, but if the designer designs, why has no consistent designation been afforded him? It was during pre-production for *Gone With The Wind* (1939) that producer David O. Selznick bestowed the title ‘production designer’ upon William Cameron Menzies - before then, the Hollywood designer had been classed as either the set dresser, the visual director or set builder. The contrasting nature of the set designer has been identified by Barsacq in his study of the different appellations assigned to the designer across national cinemas: the general term in France is ‘architecte-décorateur’, in Germany ‘architecte’, in Russia ‘artiste-peintre’, in Italy ‘scénographe’ and in America ‘art director’.<sup>9</sup> This uncertainty over title is reflected in the problematic role of the set designer in the overall development of the film. They have generally been classified as mere technicians or artistic hacks carrying out the visual instructions of the director and even within the film industry, set designers have always been given short shrift by their peers.<sup>10</sup> Recent studies have attempted to resurrect and theorise their importance. Léon Barsacq’s seminal *Le Décor de film*, a masterly overview of the working practices of European art directors, is too firmly rooted in praxis to offer a definitive approach to theorising set design. Charles and Mirella Jona Affron’s influential *Sets in Motion* provides close analysis of films and sets (including *Hôtel*

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<sup>7</sup> In Beverly Heisner, *Hollywood Art: Art Direction in the Days of the Great Studios* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 1990), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Corliss and Carlos Clarens, ‘Designed for Film: The Hollywood Art Director’, *Film Comment*, 14:3 (1978), pp. 27-58 (p. 27).

<sup>9</sup> Barsacq, *Le Décor de film*, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> See Charles Affron and Mirella Jona Affron, *Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 10-11.

*du Nord* and *Le Jour se lève*) to illustrate how set design can exceed conventional denotation but offers little in the way of conceptualising the set designers' role in the overall design process. Similarly, Peter Ettedgui's *Production Design and Art Director* represents an admirable attempt to examine the importance of the set designer in modern Hollywood. Through extensive interviews with such luminaries as Dean Tavoularis, Ken Adam and Dante Ferretti, Ettedgui uses film stills and story boards to beautifully illustrate the importance of the designer in creating mood, atmosphere and visual quality. Ultimately, though, the study fails to articulate the role of the designer in modern Hollywood and draws back from proposing exactly how the set design can be performative, producing its own mode of discourse through interaction with other constituents of the *mise en scène*.

Issues of nomenclature notwithstanding, for the purposes of this chapter I propose the term 'set designer'. It seems the most faithful translation of the designation used in credit sequences (*Décors*: Alexandre Trauner), it is accurate that Trauner, Meerson and Lourié 'design' the sets, given their involvement in the whole decor process from conception to documentation to model-making to final construction, and it is the set designer who is ultimately charged with creating the visual and physical realm of the film, designing sets which are consonant with the film's mood.

### **The 'good' set**

Barsacq has highlighted one of the decor's most important functions:

Un décor doit tenir compte d'un autre facteur: la psychologie, le comportement des êtres qui sont sensés l'habiter. S'il est réussi, ce décor remplace par son seul aspect, une page de description dans un roman et des explications verbales qui risqueraient de faire longueur dans un film.<sup>11</sup>

There is a double significance in this observation that is particularly revealing when applied to poetic realist decor: firstly, the decor should reveal and reflect the emotional and mental states of the inhabitant, and secondly, it should describe. It is axiomatic that the visual economy of a single built set will convey the multiple meaning of several pages of text describing that same space. The foregrounding of a decor's typicality is a common characteristic of poetic realist decor: a set will firstly display and then describe. The revelatory and reflective aspect of poetic realist decor has been examined in Chapter 2, but the descriptive capacity for decor is also a crucial component in poetic realism, and it was one to which set designers were acutely sensitive.

For the set to 'display', the designer will initially call upon powerful images of monumentality to serve as the narrative focal point. Anne Villelaur recognised the display aspect of the decor in *Le Jour se lève*, arguing that 'un tel nombre de mouvements d'appareil peut paraître pure virtuosité ou plaisir gratuit d'exploiter un décor photogénique'.<sup>12</sup> Designed to elicit wonder from the spectator by 'displaying itself', the set compels the viewer to read design as a particular necessity of the narrative. Trauner's feats of super-architecture in *Hôtel du Nord* or *Les Enfants du paradis* are primarily elaborate liminal decors introduced for purely visual pleasure, self-consciously inviting the audience to 'whistle the set'. Carné's mobile camera then reinforces this sense of the 'to-be-looked-at-ness', where the slow panning and

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<sup>11</sup> Barsacq, *Le Décor de film*, p. 104.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Villelaur, 'Le Jour se lève', *Dossiers du cinéma*, Collection Rondel 4\* SW 8271, p. 117, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris.

tracking around the bridge or along the Boulevard du Crime act as deliberately self-conscious cinematic techniques to highlight the decor's intrinsic monumentality.

Nevertheless, a good set also describes. Rather than having the camera drift arbitrarily across the sets, entering and withdrawing from individual rooms or wider spaces purely to showcase the materiality of the set, the film-maker can confine the action to one or two circumscribed sets in which all the constituent elements of the decor 'talk'. For a film to describe, the specifics of the design must constantly impact upon individual readings of the narrative. As there is no voice-over or narratorial point-of-view to prime the spectator to the importance of the decor, the spectator is obliged to interpret the set by deconstructing the decor's own topography. It is precisely this narrativistic tendency of poetic realist decor which underlines its specificity.

According to William Cameron Menzies, the set designer 'sketches the settings with his eye to the action that will transpire and the emotional effect that is desired'.<sup>13</sup> It is this 'emotional effect' that set designers are commissioned to achieve; creating the 'look' of the film that remains long in the mind of the spectator after the film is over. The ability to construct a habitable space while at the same time impose on it a system of spatial order is perhaps the most important contribution the set designer can make to the artistic conception of the film. In a damning review of *Star Wars: Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* (1999), Baptiste Piégay noted how director George Lucas 'sature l'écran [...] de décors imposants [...] mais se révèle paradoxalement incapable d'organiser l'espace'.<sup>14</sup> Although referring to a profoundly modern film, Piégay highlights one of the key tensions in

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<sup>13</sup> In Frayling, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Baptiste Piégay, 'Star Wars: Episode I: La Menace Fantôme', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 539 (October 1999), pp. 81-2. My emphasis.



set design - how can the designer-director collaboration 'organise space' whilst simultaneously effacing their work from the cinematic spectacle? Faced with the (dis)organised clutter of a historical epic or CGI-dominated science fiction film, the audience remain detached from the expressive impact of the decor. In these films, the sets are not containers of action or stylistic resonators of narrative concerns but instead function as super-architectures deliberately designed to distract the spectator's attention. Several designers have written that although the set is frequently designed to enhance whatever emotion emanates from the scene, the audience should not notice what the set designer has constructed. Vincent Korda, the set designer of *Things To Come* (1936) argued that 'as soon as the audience exclaims "what a marvellous set!" the art director has failed in his task'.<sup>15</sup> This important observation is echoed by Lazare Meerson:

Il est beaucoup plus difficile de composer un décor d'ambiance qui, passant inaperçu aux yeux du public, renforce la scène, et lui confère sa vraie valeur, que d'exécuter une super-architecture devant laquelle toutes les bouches restent bées d'admiration, mais qui dénature totalement le sens et la portée du découpage.<sup>16</sup>

Meerson proposes a crucial entry point into a discussion of the *modus operandi* of the poetic realist set designer. By reinforcing the notion that the 'good set' has always been defined by designers as an essentially denotative decor which effaces all presence of the designer and remains a transparent and conventional construct, Meerson recognises that cinema architecture should be an art of abjuration, subordinating the decor to the narrative. The audience should not come out of the cinema 'whistling the sets' but recognise that the decor was not so dominant as to be

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<sup>15</sup> Korda, p.34.

<sup>16</sup> In Barsacq, *Le Décor de film*, p. 191.

noticed in its own right. This act of self-effacement may be the ultimate justification for the lack of credit given set designers; that by willingly seeking to make the decor pass undetected by the audience, the designer yields up any opportunity for recognition or congratulation.

Yet the contradictions here are clearly visible. If the best set is inherently denotative, should not draw attention to itself and should be entirely subordinate to the narrative, how can a set become the visual focal point of the film? In fact, this act of self-effacement becomes an almost impossible demand. A set will always draw attention to itself because it is the first and most recognisable visual sign of a film's own fictivity. The sets for *La Kermesse héroïque* or *Hôtel du Nord* hardly pass unnoticed. How can a set designer charged with building a decor which must pass unnoticed regulate a *mise en scène* which poetic realism demanded be expressive and stylistic? If a suggestive set design was the prime unifying feature of poetic realism, how did it achieve both anonymity and prominence?

These discrepancies were ultimately conditioned by poetic realist decor's most fundamental characteristic: through a process of emphasis and exaggeration, the technique of the set designers of was one of selection and stylisation. The following observations from key personnel underline this:

Meerson de même, en exagérant les éléments caractéristiques de ce qu'il a à représenter, nous donne beaucoup plus l'illusion de la vérité qu'avec des paysages naturels;<sup>17</sup>

On choisit, on sélectionne des choses marquantes ou qui vous charment;<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Jourdan, 'Le style Clair-Meerson', *La Revue du Cinéma*, 27 (1 October 1931), pp. 32-3 (p. 33).

<sup>18</sup> Trauner in Jean-Pierre Berthomé, *Alexandre Trauner: décors de cinéma* (Paris: Jade-Flammarion, 1988), p. 30.

We seek not an exact copy of this or that setting but the expression of our perception of the setting [...] we eliminate useless details and compose the essential elements to underscore our idea of the setting. Our sets are true to life, often truer than the original settings. In willingly *choosing* what to show, we do not betray the spirit of the truth;<sup>19</sup>

Pour Max Douy, le décor doit tendre à une stylisation aussi rigoureuse que possible, permettant l'évocation d'une réalité aussi bien psychologique que sociale ou morale.<sup>20</sup>

Aspiring to, in the words of William Cameron Menzies, 'over-Russianize Russia'<sup>21</sup>, the set designer is empowered with a freedom to represent reality through his own artistic sensibility. He may borrow constituent materials from reality, but he ultimately imposes upon them a pre-ordained pattern. Realism is a series of rigid conventions and poetic realism is no exception: it is above all an interpretation and stylisation of the real. Although realism implies a definite knowledge and understanding of the real - a realist novel purports to 'show' us the real - it is more concerned with the representation of the real. As Maupassant wrote, realism is the manipulation of the real so as to express an essential truth: 'La vérité absolue, la vérité sèche, n'existe pas, personne ne pouvant avoir la prétention d'être un miroir parfait [...] Prétendre faire vrai, absolument vrai, n'est qu'une prétention irréalisable.'<sup>22</sup> G. W. Pabst once argued that Renoir and Carné were great directors because they chose realistic themes with the intention of being stylistic. Pabst proposed that both regarded realism as 'a trampoline from which one bounces higher, and it can have no value in itself. It is a matter of going beyond reality. Realism is a means, not an end'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lourié, pp. 116-7.

<sup>20</sup> In Pierre Maillot, *Le Cinéma français de Renoir à Godard* (Paris: MA Editions, 1988), p. 188.

<sup>21</sup> William Cameron Menzies, 'Pictorial Beauty in the Photoplay', in *Hollywood Directors, 1914-1940* ed. by Richard Koszarski (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 238-51 (p. 246).

<sup>22</sup> Guy de Maupassant, 'Etude sur Emile Zola', *Oeuvres posthumes II* (Paris: Louis Conard, 1930), pp. 146-67 (p. 157).

<sup>23</sup> In Raymond Durnat, *Films and Feelings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 33.

Like Flaubert's 'tremplin', reality is viewed as a springboard, a technique used to discerningly represent a way of looking at the world through selection and stylisation. What 1930s French set designers like Trauner, Meerson and Krauss sought to move away from was primary realism. Instead, their *modus operandi* was an exercise in applied imagination, depicting a reality tinged with individual artistic temperament. They sought to offer the spectator a combination of the familiar and the unique, to 'suggérer la réalité et non la photographier'.<sup>24</sup> The construction of settings in 1930s French cinema is not a mechanical reproduction but the conceptualisations of fervent imagination. Their recreations of place were never flat duplicates of reality transcribed with fidelity because the designers recognised that objectivity can never be maintained and the circumscription of the artist's *tempérament* is unfeasible.

## Selection

Cinematic realism is never simply an impotent copying of nature, but instead is a *selection* and *re-interpretation* of it such as can present the audience with a new understanding of the meaning and essence of that nature. For the majority of 1930s French cinema, the most effective design process was one of addition, a system of filling an empty frame rather than evacuating a full one. Collaborating with the designer and the set dresser, the director would include all those elements required to guarantee the 'sociological average' so as to leave no doubt in the spectator's mind as to the wealth, age, status and emotional disposition of the individual or community inhabiting the space. This filling of a space to a point of saturation is a

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<sup>24</sup> Berthomé, p. 18.

process not dissimilar to Peter Brook's famous 'I can take a space, any space' dictum, whereby the set designer takes an empty space and creates the ideal image through a process of selection, emphasis and assimilation. The integration of objects requires a certain amount of planning, as 'l'accumulation des détails inutiles ne peut que nuire à l'effet recherché'.<sup>25</sup> Isolation and then absorption of a bottle or painting into the organic whole must involve as much rigorous formulation as a window, staircase or town square.

Selection is crucial so as not to allow the proliferation of object and decor to weigh down the film and stifle it. As in the case of some 19th century novelists, where the accumulation of details and proliferation of lists meant that the implied symbolic content of the object was frequently confused, so too in cinema could the presentation of extraneous objects lead to several films collapsing under their own sociological average, threatening to push the so-called realism of the 'text' into the realms of hyper-stylisation. The danger of excessive description lies in the possibility of details becoming intrinsically important, ceasing to be transmitters of a certain aspect of the narrative but attaining a life of their own. Although attacking excessive description in nineteenth-century naturalist fiction, Ferdinand Brunetière's comments are particularly apposite in relation to decor:

Vous me montrez un tapis dans une chambre, un lit sur un tapis, une courte-pointe sur ce lit, un édredon sur cette courte-pointe [...] Quoi encore? Ce qui fatigue ici, c'est bien un peu l'insignifiance du détail, comme ailleurs c'en sera la bassesse, mais c'est bien plus encore la continuité de la description. Il y a des détails bas, il y a surtout des détails inutiles.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Léon Barsacq, 'Le Décor', in *Le Cinéma par ceux qui le font*, ed. by Denis Marion (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1949), pp. 191-207 (p. 196).

<sup>26</sup> Ferdinand Brunetière, *Le Roman naturaliste* (Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1883), p. 134. Brunetière may have been referring to Jules Verne's *Vingt milles lieues sous le mer* (1869-70), in which there is page after page of lists culled from encyclopaedias, detailing hundreds of different types of fish or coral reef. Verne would often end his long lists with 'etc.', as if deliberately drawing attention to the very arbitrariness of his observations - his list ends here simply because he chooses to.

Description, unmotivated by any narrative context and serving a purely aesthetic function, may have been a legitimate element of the rhetorical system of antiquity because its perceived lack of relation to an individual discourse was rescued by its link to the rhetorical institution as a whole. In literature, this code of extraneous detail put readers at ease, because the very uselessness of the detail anchors the reader to a recognisable milieu. This additive process may be traced back most explicitly to those nineteenth-century naturalist novelists whose characteristic readiness to describe things was epitomised by Huysmans's declaration that naturalism was 'l'ensemble obtenu par *l'observation de détails*'<sup>27</sup>, but Brunetière's comments can be related to the excessive description which proliferated through 1930s French cinema.

'Over-description' was a trap set designers of the 1930s were constantly wary of falling into - the difference between selecting and magnifying a certain decor fragment and investing it with greater narrative power or simply reciting lists and placing a proliferation of banal objects within the set. An obsession with detail and a trivialisation of objects would frequently reduce characters to the state of inanimate things, privileging instead the design of a certain space. Although this is often a deliberate, self-conscious decision, like the over-elaborate *mise en scène* in Marcel Dalio's Parisian apartment in *La Règle du jeu*, set designers frequently mistook excess for truth. When Jeancolas wrote about the 'sociological handicaps' French cinema faced in the early 1930s, he was not just referring to the industry's weakened economic infrastructure and the proliferation of military comedies and boulevard farces, but was also alluding to the visual 'sameness' of French cinema, the fact that

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<sup>27</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Oeuvres complètes I*, ed. by Lucien Descaves (Geneva: Slatkine, 1972), p. 166. My emphasis.

‘everything was in a timewarp, in an undefined space filled with the same divans, the same lacquer furniture, the same rugs [...] the same waiters uncorked the same bottle of champagne.’<sup>28</sup> This is what 1930s French cinema-goers were accustomed to because the majority of art directors equated realism with a slavish interpretation of pre-existing ‘sociological averages’, rarely attempting to imbue that realism with their own individuality.

However, the more accomplished designers arguably subscribed to a subtractive approach. Designers would strip reality to its minimum, and then reconstruct it through a precise selection of reality symbols. This technique of emptying out all the unnecessary details and then re-introducing only those necessary to fulfil a denotative function enabled these objects to resonate with extra-literal meaning. Trauner has argued that ‘il faut tout le temps simplifier pour donner un style [...] Ce qu’on ne fait pas est presque plus important que ce que l’on fait.’<sup>29</sup> Like a sculptor carefully chipping away at a block of stone, the designer constantly whittles away those uninteresting details which could undermine the epistemic flow between narrative and audience. François Albera has recognised that Meerson privileged ‘des espaces vides, des surfaces blanches où les meubles et les bibelots ne viennent pas remplir l’espace mais participer à la compréhension de la logique architecturale proposée.’<sup>30</sup> He would ‘demeuble’ the space, stripping down his design scheme so that everything remaining was a highly readable signifier. Set designers value what is left out of the frame as much as what is left in, and so the fewer objects in the

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<sup>28</sup> Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, ‘French Cinema of the 1930s and its sociological handicaps’, trans. by Brenda Ferris, in *La Vie est à Nous! - French Cinema of the Popular Front 1935-1938*, ed. by Ginette Vincendeau and Keith Reader (London: BFI, NFT Dossier 3, 1986), pp. 61-71 (p. 67).

<sup>29</sup> Michel Ciment and Isabelle Jordan, ‘Entretien avec Alexandre Trauner (1)’, *Positif*, 223 (October 1979), pp. 4-19, (p. 8).

<sup>30</sup> François Albera, *Albatros: des Russes à Paris 1919-1929* (Milan: Mazzotta and Cinémathèque Française, 1995), p. 45.

frame, the more privileged they become, standing for the function they are assigned and reflecting and revealing narrative points. By personalising the space by introducing certain props or decor fragments, the set designer could strike a balance 'between information and poetry, between circumstantial detail and abstraction'<sup>31</sup> and associations of their own could be wrought into the interpretation of the film.

In many cases, removing an object can compliment the narrative as much as adding one to the design process. Ken Adam recalls how Laurence Olivier was rehearsing a scene in *Sleuth* (1972) next to a fireplace Adam had designed. Noticing three objects that seemed out of place, Adam removed them. After the scene was shot, Olivier confided to Adam, 'I'm glad you did that. I knew they wouldn't fit in.'<sup>32</sup>

As Renoir's regular set designer from the mid-1930s onwards, Lourié's design scheme typified the working practices of 1930s designers - the selection and amplification of the essential. During production of *Les Bas-fonds* (1936), Lourié persuaded Renoir to remove from the decor any objects or decor fragments which would draw attention to themselves because of their 'Russian-ness'. As a result, samovars, paintings, clothing and beards were all removed. This process of subtraction did not erase realistic signs of actuality or ethnology, but instead produced 'un décor efficace et sobre'<sup>33</sup>, in which the elements left in the frame became privileged transmitters of information rather than anonymous 'props' designed to underpin the reality effect. Lourié also consulted with Erich von Stroheim before designing von Rauffenstein's room in *La Grande illusion*, a

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<sup>31</sup> Colin Crisp, *The Classic French Cinema 1930-1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; London and New York: Tauris, 1993), p. 372.

<sup>32</sup> In Peter Ettedgui, *Production Design and Art Direction* (Crans-Près-Céligny, Switzerland: Rotovision, 1999), p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> Roger Viry-Babel, *Jean Renoir: Le jeu et la règle* (Paris: Denoël, 1986), p. 91.



decision which underlined the importance of selection, and not slavish imitation or reconstitution in the name of realism. In *La Règle du jeu*, the floor of the entrance hallway at La Colinière is dominated by a criss-cross of black and white marble squares. The immediate impression invoked in the astute spectator is of a chessboard. This subtle decor fragment again paraphrases the narrative themes, insinuating the underlying theme of game-playing that runs throughout the film. In all three films, Lourié keeps the sets uncluttered, free from over-elaboration and decorative saturation, making them highly readable.

If an object or decor fragment is left in the frame, then it has to signify its meaning almost immediately. Trauner states that the designer should: 'Aider la mise en scène pour que la compréhension soit immédiate, parfois frappante, parfois discrète, pour que le spectateur comprenne: un médecin est dans son cabinet de consultation, et l'on sait si c'est un médecin mondain, ou un médecin pauvre.'<sup>34</sup> There is little use in a decor that unintentionally muddles or blocks the semantic stream. The decor should instead privilege those selected details which provide an immediate and unequivocal reading. There is an implicit awareness among the most accomplished of designers that they should refrain from employing that most lazy of cinematic devices, the sign. Hilyard M. Brown elaborates: 'I think the worst thing an art director could do is have an insert that says "Courtroom" and then you cut to the courtroom. If the scene and the courtroom doesn't tell the audience that this is a courtroom without this sign, we're in a lot of trouble.'<sup>35</sup> The decor needs to be visually unambiguous and should yield up to a spontaneous reading. By selecting

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<sup>34</sup> Ciment and Jordan, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Rich Cheatham, in Affrons, p. 221. After assisting Van Nest Polgase and Perry Ferguson on *Citizen Kane*, Brown was most famous for his German Expressionist-inflected designs for *Night of the Hunter* (1955), and won an Academy Award for co-designing *Cleopatra* (1963).

key constituent elements, the designer should be able to create a readable set with economy of detail.

For the 1930s set designer, as for Zola and Brassai, a photographic-style realism might represent a way to search out the relevance of detail, but it was always a complement rather than a source of that detail. Their fusion of decor and imagination was at once beautiful and unsettling in that the producer of reality, whether novelist, photographer or cinema-architect, was always prone to individual subjectivity. Particular designers each brought a recognisable imprimatur to their work which marked their achievement out from their contemporaries. A slavish recreation of reality should be avoided and instead film design should involve a heightening of reality through the careful selection and presentation of decor and the privileging of distillation over proliferation.

## **Stylisation**

Mais il est très important, quand on fait un travail [...], de trouver quelque chose qui devienne intéressant à un moment donné, de faire un sorte de prouesse. Je ne peux pas travailler autrement.<sup>36</sup>

The 'quelque chose' that Trauner sought in his work to arrest the spectator's attention was an important element of poetic realist set design. Whether a Hollywood blockbuster, an art-house film or a 'designer-for-hire' routine assignment, the designer must constantly seek ways to punctuate an essentially verisimilitudinous decor with one instance of noticeable visual intervention. The basic paradox of 1930s decor was that the designer could never simply be an

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<sup>36</sup> Ciment and Jordan, p. 19.

inanimate photographic lens, transcribing design with a monotonous fidelity; instead the individual spatial conception would always vary and be recognisably different. Conforming to Zola's belief that a successful artist was one who possessed 'le sens du réel et qui exprime la nature, en la faisant vivante de sa vie propre'<sup>37</sup>, the *modus operandi* of set designers was to reproduce reality and then tinge it with their own individual perception. All art forms necessitate a personal vision; in all cases, the 'tempérament' of the artist will come into play. Zola argued that 'le romancier est fait d'un observateur et d'un expérimentateur'; as an observer he sees the facts, describes the characters and milieu and sets up the 'terrain solide', while as an experimenter he steps back and 'institue l'expérience' in order to 'faire mouvoir' both the protagonist and the reader.<sup>38</sup> A similar dialectic is established in set design; on the one hand an accurate transposition of reality is called for, while on the other, the action space (which, once established, becomes the arena for interaction) should display an accentuated *mise en scène*. Léon Barsacq argued that to obtain the equivalent of reality, it is 'nécessaire de faire ressortir le côté riche ou sordide, encombré ou nu, grêle ou pesant d'un décor, en *exagérant le caractère dominant des éléments* qui le composent et en supprimant les détails inutiles'.<sup>39</sup> In other words, after selection comes stylisation.

In the same way that the set design of 1920s German Expressionism stylised nature to the point of abstraction, poetic realism was predicated on an accentuated *mise en scène*. Yet the fundamental difference between the two movements was that German Expressionism was deliberately unrealistic and inauthentic because the anti-naturalist *mise en scène* was totalising. Expressionist cityscapes were dreamlike

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<sup>37</sup> Emile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971), p. 223.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 63-4.

<sup>39</sup> Barsacq, *Le Décor de film*, p. 103. My emphasis.

environments in which studio renderings of urban spaces were exaggerated to perfection. The spatial haphazardness and fractured geographies of *Caligari* may have succeeded in conveying the mental states of a madman, but through a deliberate escape from reality and the stylistic anti-naturalistic approach to *mise en scène*, German Expressionist set designs were not 'true replicas of existing objects and landscapes but instead a stripped-down version of reality'.<sup>40</sup>

Few designers are interested in designing a decor 'as it is'. Their function is to furnish the public with a reality that is real in the conventional sense but to depart from the sameness and monotony which frequently characterises the actual place. What they seek is a heightened reality or stylisation. For most set designers, this stylisation could be effected through a violation of architectural principles for the sake of emotional response or the development of a stylised *mise en scène*. Barsacq warns that set designers 'devra à tout prix éviter le "poncif", le "décor type"' and aim instead for 'le cadre qui a le plus de caractère'.<sup>41</sup> Once decor ceases to be inventive and imaginative, it lapses into picturesque convention, devoid of any poetic or extra-narrative function. Only through stylisation and the assimilation of punctative elements can poetic realist decor retain its primacy.

One extension of this stylisation in poetic realism is the use of punctative signs. At the 1989 MystFest in Cattolica, the Italian theorist Guido Fink proposed that the *noir* city was essentially an alphabet city, 'laced with words, letters and signs, which displays a neurotic terror of silence and the unnamed'.<sup>42</sup> Although the employment of this metaphor of the 'city as alphabet' is predominantly associated with *film noir*,

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<sup>40</sup> Helmut Weihsmann, 'The City in Twilight : Charting the Genre of the "City Film" 1900-1930', in *Cinema and Architecture: Méliès, Mallet-Stevens, Multimedia*, ed. by François Penz and Maureen Thomas, (London: BFI, 1997), pp. 8-27 (p. 13).

<sup>41</sup> Barsacq, *Le Décor de film*, p. 104.

<sup>42</sup> Pam Cook, 'In the Picture', *Sight and Sound*, 58:4 (Autumn 1989), p. 221. The MystFest is an annual film festival devoted to cinematic and literary configurations of the *noir* style.

it is particularly valuable in understanding how signs and advertisements can lead to a greater understanding of and penetration into the essence of the poetic realist set. One way of stylising the reality effect is to use quotations or the insertion of recognisable signifiers to underpin the narrative. In *Le Jour se lève*, the repetition of 'Dubo-Dubon-Dubonnet' on the side of the *immeuble* is an example of Thiher's 'sociological average', combining the striking visuality of the advertisement with a familiar symbol indicative of time and place. In other key films of the period words, letters and signs are crucial in creating moods of decadence or escape: the 'bal' in *Sous les toits de Paris* and *Quatorze juillet*, 'Fantasio' in *Faubourg Montmartre*, 'Le Tabarin' in *Le Quai des brumes*, 'Aziani' in *Le Grand jeu* or the flashing neon letters of 'Chez Michèle' in *Carrefour*. Again these signs perform a dual function, indicating place and signifying atmosphere. The recurrence of these visual motifs may not be as striking as in *film noir*, where the frenetic interchange between flashing neon and garish interiors often emblematises the narrative's own frantic trajectory, but in 1930s French cinema they function as far more than simple 'scene-setters'; their mere presence hints at a complex interaction between setting and character that is filtered through and underpinned by stylised symbols.

Techniques such as these were important in allowing the set designer to establish a reputation as the creators of stark visual styles. By exaggerating the characteristic elements of a familiar space, the designer could create the impression of a heightened reality that seemed more real than the real thing. Poetic realist set design was concerned with maintaining a fragile equilibrium between selection and stylisation. Designers sought to reconstitute the conventional through the intensification of certain representative elements of the familiar. The viewer's own appreciation of the decor would then be determined by the effectiveness of the

balance and the interplay between realism and stylisation. The following overview of the key set designers of the 1930s will attempt to illustrate a homogeneous working practice, which involved on the one hand extensive documentation and on the other the selection-stylisation axis which exemplifies the most enduring design schemes of the 1930s.

### **The Albatros group**

After the 1917 Russian Revolution, Joseph Ermolieff transplanted his production company to Paris, bringing with him a wave of *émigré* directors (Volkoff, Protazanoff), actors (Mosjoukine) and most crucially, set designers. The company became Albatros Films in 1922 and quickly established a reputation for producing extravagant and elaborate historical epics which relied upon a decorative and symbolic set design. Many of the *émigré* set designers had initially trained as painters and they can be credited with introducing water-colour sketches and preparatory drawings of the intended decor into the French film industry. In virtually all aspects of set design, the Russian influence was a crucial determinant in the development of narrativised decor, with Boris Bilinsky and Ivan Lochachoff particularly instrumental in moving French design away from painted backdrops and towards intricately designed sets.

Inspired by their work for the Ballets Russes, they integrated the visual influences of orientalism and exoticism. By constructing anti-realistic settings, the designers allowed the stylised decor to be a detailed transmitter of symbolic resonances. This thrust towards ‘the extravagant, the exotic, the baroque, the poetic’<sup>43</sup> by the Albatros

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<sup>43</sup> Crisp, p. 369.

set designers did not entirely account for the verisimilitudinous strain of poetic realism, but undoubtedly reinforced the impression that a stylised decor could be more than a decorative element, but a powerful transposition and accentuation of the real into the realm of the poetic.

### **Lazare Meerson**

Meerson is regarded as one of the pioneers of studio set design and an influential presence in the development of both French and British cinema design. He was born in Russia in 1900, and after studying architecture and painting he arrived in Paris, via Germany in 1924. He began working at Kamenka's Albatros Films at Montreuil, and after assisting art director Alberto Cavalcanti on *Feu Mathias Pascal* (1924), he began working regularly with Jacques Feyder and René Clair. Clearly influenced by the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs held in Paris in 1925, Meerson imbued several of his design schemes with an Art Deco fusion of linearity and clarity. Trauner identified him as the first set designer who incorporated glass, cement and iron in to his set designs, marking another rupture from the *carton-pâte* flimsiness of much of pre-1920s design. Recognised for his work in both modern and period idioms, Meerson soon established himself as the prime set designer in French cinema.

Most film historians argue that Meerson's greatest achievement was to revolutionise art direction by breaking away from conventional studio-bound 'naturalism' and combine the competing filaments of stylisation and verisimilitude. In a 1927 article in *Cinémagazine*, he described film decor as an art of abnegation and simplification and it is this balance which typifies the most successful poetic

realist set designs.<sup>44</sup> That Trauner, Wakhévitch and Lourié all worked as assistants to Meerson as some stage in their careers reinforces his influence on the visual style of poetic realism. These designers all subsequently adopted and exploited his techniques of isolating and foregrounding key elements to accentuate the emotional impact of the set.

Meerson is primarily remembered for his work on *La Kermesse héroïque* (1935), which combined forced perspective with authentic detail.<sup>45</sup> Certainly the Boom square and its painstakingly reconstructed interiors are a triumph of the authentic and the imagined. Jacques Feyder wanted to evoke the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century world of Dutch and Flemish painting, and Meerson's carefully reconstructed decor relied upon extensive research and documentation to recreate an authentic exterior architecture and interiors full of period detail.<sup>46</sup> Through exaggerating the characteristic elements of the represented scene, Meerson established a heightened degree of reality which appeared more real than reality itself.

The scaled height of the buildings enhanced the sense of perspective, the size of the houses were reduced by three-quarters to facilitate framing and create a distorted sense of place and the use of iron, glass and cement lent a greater materiality to the decor. The authenticity of Meerson's sets allows for an oscillation between interior and exterior; in the former, the spaces are private, intimate depictions of life in which the narrative develops and the characters dominate; in the latter, characters are eclipsed by the decor and key narrative clashes are played out in Meerson's

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<sup>44</sup> Repr. in Barsacq, *Le Décor de film*, p. 191.

<sup>45</sup> François Vinneuil praised the architecture of the entire film and the meticulous reproduction of Flemish objects and furniture in 'L'Ecran de la Semaine: *La Kermesse héroïque*', *Action française*, 6 December 1935, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> According to Guiseppe De Santis, the arresting decor singles it out as *calligrafismo*. A 'calligraphic film' is generally historical in subject and designed under the influence of art history (see Affrons, p. 85).



intricately designed action spaces. There was a linearity in Meerson's set designs which combined the modernist Art Deco aesthetic established in the 1920s with the realisation that a strong geometry would lead the eyes of the audience directly to objects of significance.

It was in Clair's films, and particularly the sets for *Sous les toits de Paris* (1930), *Le Million* (1931) and *Quatorze juillet* (1932), in which Meerson combined a meticulously rendered foreground realism with an abstract, illusory background one. These films all employed an exaggerated perspective, an innovation which recurred in many of his sets. This characteristic forced perspective gave the sets the illusion of stretching to a vanishing point. *Sous les toits de Paris* synthesised together the traditional *topoi* of popular Paris - mansard rooftops, steep stone steps, corner cafés - to create a memorably evocative *lieu de mémoire*. Similarly, we cannot conceive of 1930s French cinema without thinking of the opening scene of *Le Million*, where the camera floats above the Paris rooftops picking out the dance in the room below. A man opens the skylight, beckoning both camera and audience into the diegetic community. By looking inside the decor, the audience were caught up in the whirl of Meerson's design, accepting his *carton-pâte* depiction of Paris as the true portrait of actuality. Dudley Andrew encapsulates Meerson's design strategy as one of 'intimacy'<sup>47</sup> due primarily to an ability to fashion an authentic look through the careful selection and insertion of primary characteristics. His sets would evolve systematically from sketches while a meticulous documentation of pre-existing spaces allowed for a greater authenticity in the decor. As demonstrated in chapter 2, the design scheme for *Quatorze juillet* seamlessly integrates traditional objects -

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<sup>47</sup> Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 179.

lanterns, garlands and Bastille Day flags - into the studio architecture, reinforcing the reality effect and poeticising the narrative. What Meerson accomplished was the ability to reflect the emotional valency of the characters in the architecture.

Meerson was never in thrall to a rigid realism (Trauner once recalled his antipathy to 'réalisme au premier degré'<sup>48</sup>) because despite the painstaking verisimilitude of his decors, they were inflected by an authenticity based upon a highly personal poetic approach to conceiving traditional urban spaces. Meerson occupied the middle ground, embracing authenticity and stylisation, where the decor was suggestive rather than blatant. In his decor, 'le réel glisse naturellement vers le poétique'.<sup>49</sup>

### Alexandre Trauner

Peintre avant tout, Trauner vise un réalisme transfiguré - tout est vrai et en même temps tout est autre.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps the most natural confluence between the competing values of selection and stylisation was epitomised by Alexandre Trauner. It is his name that is most intimately connected to poetic realist set design and it is his work on Marcel Carné's films which did most to perpetuate the grandeur of French cinema design in the 1930s. Yet despite being immortalised in a poem by Jacques Prévert<sup>51</sup>, little has

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<sup>48</sup> Trauner in Berthomé, p. 22.

<sup>49</sup> Jean Douchet and Gilles Nadeau, *Paris Cinéma: Une ville vue par le cinéma de 1895 à nos jours* (Paris: Editions du Mars, 1987), p. 106.

<sup>50</sup> Ciment and Jordan, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> See Appendix 1.

been done to wrest him from what Keith Reader calls the ‘penumbra of subtext’.<sup>52</sup> A search through *The All Movie Database* (www.allmovie.com) under ‘Alexandre Trauner’ supplies a list of all the films he had worked on as well as a mini-biography and a list of his contemporaries. However, the whole range of terms used to describe his input on various films demonstrates the innate difficulty for decor theorists to appropriately codify set designers: for *Hôtel du Nord* (1938), he is credited as Production Designer, for *Le Jour se lève* (1939), he is responsible for Design and Set Decoration, while on *Les Enfants du paradis* (1945), he is Art Director. Much of this information is contradicted on *The Internet Movie Database* (www.imdb.com), which credits Trauner as the Production Designer of *Les Enfants du paradis* and *Le Jour se lève* and the Art Director of *Hôtel du Nord*.<sup>53</sup>

Most historiographical studies of 1930s French cinema afford only passing references to Trauner. Dudley Andrew’s somewhat erroneous claim that his work has been ‘much discussed’<sup>54</sup> hints at a deeper misconception about the role of the set designer in cinema and although Trauner’s collection of interviews with Jean-Pierre Berthomé may offer a revealing summation of his artistic and documentary methods, they fail to provide an adequate conceptual framework on how the role of 1930s set designers might be articulated.

It was perhaps inevitable that Trauner would collaborate with Carné. Not only had both served apprenticeships under that other abiding director-designer team from the 1930s, René Clair and Lazare Meerson, but also both would ‘schematize the real

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<sup>52</sup> Keith A. Reader, ‘Subtext: Paris of Alexandre Trauner’, in *Spaces in European Cinema*, ed. by Myrto Konstantarakos (Exeter and Portland, OR: Intellect, 2000), pp. 35-41 (p.41). Two recent documentaries on Carné, *Marcel Carné, ou si le destin savoir voir* (1978) and *Carné, vous avez dit Carné?* (1994) barely mention Trauner’s name.

<sup>53</sup> For an explanation of the differences between production designer and art director, see Corliss and Clarens, p. 36.

<sup>54</sup> Andrew, p. 187. He refers in particular to Hélène Chardavonne’s thesis ‘Evolution du décors dans le cinéma français des origines à nos jours’ which I have regrettably been unable to trace.

through elaborate artifice'.<sup>55</sup> After studying painting in Budapest, Trauner moved to France in 1929, and was assistant to Meerson. As with those other set designers who came from Eastern Europe, such as Barsacq, Meerson and Wakhévitch, Trauner regarded the cinema as a type of architecturalised painting and he established the practice of producing water-colour sketches of projected sets as models for the final construction. His rigorously planned set designs undoubtedly contributed to the pro-filmic reality of French poetic realist cinema and his employment of familiar poetic realist *topoi* such as claustrophobic angles and wet paving stones was maintained through the 1930s. Like Meerson, Trauner relied upon extensive documentation and sought to combine verisimilitude with stylisation and to identify the typical and reject the excessive. His ethnographic interest in documenting traditional urban spaces conforms to the artistic trends of the 1930s. Photographers Brassai and Eugène Atget both adopted the same *modus operandi* as the set designer: by combining 'the furtive curiosity of the stalker'<sup>56</sup> and extensive pictorial documentation, they aimed to provide an ethnographic portrayal of the city.

Trauner's first collaborated with Carné in *Drôle de drame* (1936). Although the film cannot explicitly be codified as poetic realist because of its fusion of elaborate gags, anti-clerical satire and eccentric performances (Jouvet in a kilt, Barrault who kills butchers 'de temps en temps' out of his fondness for sheep), the trend is nonetheless set by both designer and director for the creation of phantasmagoric set designs which awaken embedded memories.

His work on the film established a *modus operandi* that was to typify his work throughout his career. Favouring what Turk identified as 'mood over

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<sup>55</sup> Edward Baron Turk, *Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 90.

<sup>56</sup> Gaby Wood, 'Seeing in the Dark', *Guardian Weekend*, 15 July 2000, pp. 10-16 (p. 14).

verisimilitude'<sup>57</sup>, Trauner crucially used documentation as a starting point for a personal rendition of an already existing space. It was essential to identify the space's 'principaux détails caractéristiques et de les mettre en valeur en écartant ce qui n'ajoute rien à l'atmosphère'.<sup>58</sup> These details would vary from case to case, but they would always be decor fragments immediately identifiable to the spectator - often a door or rooftop, or often the more typical visual *topoi* of an urban space, such as the paving of a street or a tram carriage. By establishing the quintessence of the prospective decor and maintaining a balance between established detail and aestheticised reality, Trauner did not create 'un décor symbolique' but rather 'un décor qui *dit le drame*'.<sup>59</sup>

His most abiding set designs were those characterised by the construction and maintaining of the reality effect. Any cinematic decor, whether constructed in the studio, modified to serve the needs of the narrative, or unqualified reality, constitutes the reality effect, and in *Hôtel du Nord*, Alexandre Trauner does not construct a 'poetic' reality but instead constructs a 'real' reality in the studio. The decor represents the everyday because it appropriates 'reality' (bridge, hotel, canal, street) and inserts it into the narrative. Andrew has written that Trauner 'would characteristically seek a maximum reduction of objects on the screen, though making certain that everything that does remain is absolutely authentic to the period, class, and location the film is trying to represent'.<sup>60</sup>

In a lengthy interview Trauner admitted that his set construction depended as much as possible on realistic details and the integration of documentary research, but

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<sup>57</sup> Edward Baron Turk, *Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 89.

<sup>58</sup> Trauner in Pierre Leprohon, *Les 1001 métiers du cinéma* (Paris: Jacques Melot, 1947), p. 138.

<sup>59</sup> Douchet and Nadeau, p. 127.

<sup>60</sup> Andrew, p. 187.

that did not necessarily mean that the set would be 'real'; instead, he argued, 'on essaie d'obtenir que photographiquement ça donne un effet du réel.'<sup>61</sup> Decor is complicit in triggering the reality effect and as a result the audience is undoubtedly drawn into the narrative, a fact underlined by Graham Greene in his review of the film: 'we believe in the desperate lovers and the suicide pact on the brass bed in the shabby room, just because of the bicyclists on the quay, the pimp quarrelling with his woman in another room, and the First-Communion party'.<sup>62</sup> As in *Le Quai des brumes*, Trauner imports brief documentary shots of the canal locks during the opening credits and the middle of the film; again heightening the reality effect and locking the spectator firmly into the narrative. The authenticity of Trauner's microcosm is vital in maintaining the reality effect necessary to reinforce the film's multi-layered narrative.

His most renowned sets are liminal - they are the first substantial shots of the film and immediately establish the spatial arena in which the narrative will develop. The bridge in *Hôtel du Nord*, the *immeuble* in *Le Jour se lève*, the Boulevard du Crime in *Les Enfants du paradis*, the white castle in *Les Visiteurs du soir* and the metro station in *Les Portes de la nuit* all provide spatial arenas which anchor their individual narratives to a clearly visible and highly charged milieu. What characterises all of these sets is the constant stream of motion within the expanse of space. By foregrounding the monumentality of the decor, Trauner establishes the sets as the dynamic site of all the narrative comings-and-goings. When Jacques Leenhardt acknowledged Trauner's decor specificity as 'la justesse du rapport entre

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<sup>61</sup> Ciment and Jordan, p. 17.

<sup>62</sup> Graham Greene, 'Hôtel du Nord', *The Spectator*, 23 June 1939, repr. in *The Pleasure-Dome: the collected film criticism of Graham Greene: 1935-1940*, ed. by John Russell Taylor (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), pp. 229-30 (p. 230).

un espace et une action'<sup>63</sup>, he underlined the importance of person-environment interaction that Trauner's most renowned sets achieved.

Trauner's skill was an ability to 'faire ressortir les elements qui *jouaient*'<sup>64</sup>, to appropriate realism and then simplify, stylise or accentuate. The representation of reality in 1930s French cinema is predicated above all on selection and stylisation. According to Bertrand Tavernier, Trauner 'sait isoler un détail qui rendra un décor organique, au-delà d'un réalisme superficiel et qui saura lier intimement ce décor à l'action'.<sup>65</sup> Through the placing of these isolated recognisable images into a cohesive pattern, the impression of reality is established. In poetic realism, that representation is often so perfect that it is mistaken for the real thing, and it is in Trauner's designs that this practice is exemplified.

### **The hyper-real decor**

Yet for all the proposed synthesis of the real and the artificial and the interplay between the denotative and the symbolic, the decor was still essentially an ephemeral construct, anchored not to physical reality but to collective memory. While film images may possess an iconic, indexical or symbolic relationship with whatever they stand for, they can never be the 'thing itself'. The success with which the film process masks its very modes of production is in some way troublesome, because of cinema's power to mis-represent; to declare to the audience that the film image is an exact replica of reality, untarnished and unmanipulated. What I would suggest is the inherent hyper-reality of 1930s decor.

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<sup>63</sup> Alexandre Trauner, *Alexandre Trauner: cinquante ans de cinéma* (Paris: Cinémathèque Française, 1986). This book does not have numbered pages.

<sup>64</sup> Berthomé, p. 32.

<sup>65</sup> In Trauner, n. pag.

Jean Baudrillard coined the term 'hyper-real' to characterise how certain places simulate the 'real', and can in fact replace it by offering apparently identical sensuous and enjoyable feelings of the beautiful and curious. His interpretation of hyper-reality is 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyper-real'.<sup>66</sup> Baudrillard argued that there are three levels of simulation: the first is a distinct copy of reality (such as a painting or map), the second a copy so good it blurs the boundaries between representation and reality. The third level, or hyper-real, is one which produces a reality of its own without being based on an existing reality. This final 'simulacrum' contains no time or history, no accumulation of shapes or forms, but replaces the authentic with an artificial surface, taken by all as the 'real'. So when the gap between the signifier and the signified closes to such a point that the sign does not stand for anything other than itself, the meanings of the image become hyper-real; or 'more real than real'.

This hyper-reality can be related to a documentary exercise which had wide-ranging repercussions on cinematic set design. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Parisian photographers Louis and Henri (a.k.a. *frères*) Séeberger were commissioned by Hollywood studio executives to take photographs of traditional Parisian spaces (bars, hotels, streets, arcades) and send them back to the American production companies as templates for future cinematic depictions of Paris. What was wanted was 'un air de réalité', a photographic depiction of an authentic, *cinéma-vérité* Paris which would allow Hollywood set designers to use this documentary evidence as a blueprint for their own depictions of reality. However, close inspection of the photographs does not reveal verisimilitudinous depictions of Parisian urban spaces

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<sup>66</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.



but 'un faux-semblant, une copie non pas conforme, mais altérée par l'imagination'.<sup>67</sup> The traditional iconic spaces of Paris are empty spaces - whether deliberate or not, the photographers have neglected to capture the throbbing pulse of the metropolis and have omitted virtually any trace of human presence. The photographs are of empty bars and uncrowded streets, totally untypical of 1930s Paris. This spatial evacuation may be attributed to the desire to depict space *tout court*, devoid of inhabitants and the characteristics of modern urban life, but the overall impression is one of reality altered and airbrushed. Justification for this depopulation came from the American studios, who wanted photographs which 'ne montrent pas du monde' but showed 'détails authentiques sur le Intérieurs et Extérieurs [sic] de bâtiments'.<sup>68</sup> The printed photographs remain essentially snapshots of unreality far removed from the traditional visual *topoi* of 1930s French cinema. Whatever the meaning attributed to the Séeberger project, its metaphorical value is highly revealing. These empty 'spaces' are reconstructed in Hollywood cinema and turned into 'places', precisely because the built environment has been reorganised as a social place. Yet the Séeberger's original blueprints have been left disembodied. Space only becomes place once it has been populated, and consequently the images presented remain Parisian 'spaces' rather than 'places'. The photographs capture the look and architectural form of Paris, but eschew a detailed ethnological or sociological approach to ultimately produce an unreal image. By achieving the transposition of space into purely cinematic terms, the photographs provided pre-existing architectural blueprints for future art directors to copy or adapt according to the narrative needs, corroborating Ernst Lubitsch's view that in

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<sup>67</sup> Gilbert Salachas, *Le Paris d'Hollywood sur un air de réalité* (Paris: Caisse nationale des monuments historiques et des sites, 1994), p. 17.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p. 17.

Hollywood there was always ‘a Paramount Paris and MGM Paris and RKO Paris and Universal Paris and of course the real Paris’.<sup>69</sup> What occurs is a complex form of Chinese whispers between the real Paris, the Paris in the photographs and the Paris constructed by set designers using the photographs as a model - as the ‘message’ is transmitted across the three representations it undergoes a series of distortions and modifications in which the end product is radically different from the original template.<sup>70</sup>

A similar process occurs in poetic realist set designs. The decor is frequently a perfect representation of something that never existed - not a reproduction of the real but a simulacrum, a copy for which there is no original. Meerson’s and Trauner’s 1930s set designs encapsulate this ambivalence. On the one hand, they employ photographic documentary evidence and existing sketches to re-produce exactly the streets of Flemish hamlets or the Paris Boulevard du Crime, while on the other, they create film images that have no recognisable visual heritage - the hotel and bridge in *Hôtel du Nord* and the tower block in *Le Jour se lève* assume hyper-realistic proportions precisely because Trauner is copying a copy of a pre-existing structure. The success of Trauner’s sets for *Les Enfants du paradis* emanates from their lack of originality and from their accordance to an ‘ideal “original” which we already carry in our mind’s eye’.<sup>71</sup> By copying contemporary sketches and illustrations which were already selections of reality, Trauner was conforming to a third-level

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<sup>69</sup> Christopher Frayling in *Moonraker, Strangelove and other celluloid dreams: the visionary art of Ken Adam*, ed. by David Sylvester (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1999), p. 45.

<sup>70</sup> The use of the Séeburger photographs is similar to the use of the picture postcard as an accepted system for representing city life. Postcards propose an emblematic depiction of the city, a shorthand signifier that encapsulates the diversity of the urban holiday experience. Like the photographs of Paris monuments, the postcard also relies upon translating visual sights into a metonymic representation of the wider urban space. Likewise, the lack of individuals in postcards is reminiscent of the absence of *petites gens* in the photographs.

<sup>71</sup> Jill Forbes, *Les Enfants du paradis* (London: BFI, 1997), p. 21. Due to his clandestine status during the Occupation, Trauner was unable to visit Paris during the pre-production of the film, sending instead assistants to the Musée Carnavalet to garner his customary documentation.

simulation of the real. With first- and second-level simulations, the real exists and the audience calibrates the success of the simulation against the real. The dilemma with Trauner's designs is that they create a third-order simulation in which the real is without origin, in this case from documentation which was already the impressions of other illustrators.

Barsacq recognised this feature of Trauner's method: 'En ne retenant dans les documents que ceux qui le touchent par leur aspect insolite, frisant le surréalisme, Trauner opère une sélection qui va lui permettre à l'aide de ses propres souvenirs de composer les décors très personnels.'<sup>72</sup> As well as proposing an alignment with Surrealism (which shall be explored in chapter 7), Barsacq corroborates the implicit hyper-reality running through Trauner's decor. By rejecting first-degree realism, he appropriated pre-existing images (the bridges and buildings of his work certainly look and feel as if they existed long before they were re-constructed in a studio) but mis-represented reality by shifting their perspective, altering their dimensions and tampering with space to create a cinematic illusion. The complicit film-goer enters the cinema prepared to willingly suspend their disbelief and their impression of reality is filtered through the discernible images and representations they see everyday. The skilful film-maker and set designer can therefore mask the division between real and imaginary, between what existed already and what has been totally fabricated from scratch to create a sensation of the real filtered through the screen of make-believe. Trauner ultimately justified this technique provided that 'les spectateurs ne voient pas le point de rupture où commence mon invention'.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Barsacq, *Le Décor de film*, p. 65.

<sup>73</sup> Berthomé, p. 76.

## Conclusion

Boris Leven is adamant that the relationship between the director and the designer is the key factor on which the success of their efforts rests: 'There must exist between them a complete trust and understanding. The relationship must grow, flourish, give out creative impulses, and above all create a feeling of respect and interdependence.'<sup>74</sup> The set designer's task is not just to understand what dramatic effect the director requires and marshal the resources of screen illusion to achieve it, but contribute to the story as it was being constructed. Through a systematic method of selection and stylisation, Trauner and Meerson would recreate a meticulous imitation of the set and then accentuate specific trace elements of it to create a certain atmosphere.

Like Bazin's mathematical asymptote, filmic representation is always doomed to fall a little short of its goal and the picture of reality in each work of art will always be recognisably individual. The most successful set designers were those who gave the audience the details it expected to see but at the same time sustained an emphatic personal approach to even the most mundane requirements of the script. Both Meerson and Trauner produced intimate 'chamber-piece' dramas which were confined to one claustrophobic space and lavish productions reliant upon elaborate sets and complex negotiations between decor, camera and individual. I have demonstrated that the dominant design process in poetic realist decor is a synthesis of the documentary real and the subsequent poeticisation of that real. Ultimately,

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<sup>74</sup> In Corliss and Clarens, p. 36. Born in Moscow and an architecture graduate from the University of Southern California, Leven began his career as a sketch artist at Paramount. He is most famous for designing the isolated mansion in *Giant* (1956), an Academy Award for *West Side Story* (1961), and an enduring collaboration with Martin Scorsese.

poetic realist decor ‘spoke’; its inherent performativity demonstrating the potential to reflect and reinforce the dominant thematic concerns.

## Chapter 4 - 'Un réel de synthèse': the location/studio dialectic

Il me semble que le studio est le lieu où l'image que l'on a vue en imagination peut être réalisée en contrôlant tout, exactement comme le fait un peintre sur une toile avec son pinceau [...] Artifice et fiction y atteignent plus de précision, plus de vraisemblance, plus de fidélité.<sup>1</sup>

Pagnol et Renoir exceptés, tout le cinéma de l'époque se faisait en vase clos.<sup>2</sup>

The call to confront reality has resonated throughout film history with the question of how the visual signs of actuality might be captured and real life replicated forever dominating discussions of cinematic realism. Amédée Lange (René Lefèvre) may be unhappy about the idea of 'Arizona Jim' becoming a film ('Ils vont encore tourner ça sur les toiles peintes. C'est moche') but the scene in which he dresses up as a cowboy against the backdrop of painted cacti is paradigmatic in its demonstration of the insufficiency of the artificial world - Arizona has to be brought into the studio in order to capture its essence. Perhaps the most important of all discussions on cinematic realism is the difference between location shooting and studio shooting, a debate that has been part of the aesthetic discourse since cinema's inception. This chapter will explore the various ways in which poetic realist film-makers and designers were able to create their own uniquely contiguous and expressive space through a careful combination of location and set work, with all the wider implications of reality and artifice that such choices entailed.

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<sup>1</sup> Federico Fellini in Jean-Pierre Berthomé, *Les Ateliers du 7e art: 1: Avant le clap* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Claude Beylie, 'L'auberge fameuse', *L'Avant-scène du cinéma*, 269 (June 1981), pp. 4-5 (p. 4).

## The great debate: location vs. studio shooting

France initially dominated world film production. In 1907, there were nine studios in the Paris region - Méliès, Pathé, Gaumont, Eclair, Théophile Pathé, Georges Hattot, Désirée Weiss, Galland, and Sté Lux. Yet by the 1920s, the French studio film industry had become 'fragmented, atomized, and vulnerable'.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the vertically integrated Hollywood studio system or its Italian and German counterparts at Cinecittà and Ufa, French cinema had come to rely upon small-scale technical teams and modest artistic budgets that precluded the opportunity for lavish aesthetic experiments and grandiose sets. The conglomeration of studios around the Paris region was not entirely suited to mass production due to inclement and unpredictable weather conditions, while according to Barsacq, there was only one studio built specifically for the production of sound film (Paramount at St. Maurice). Even those smaller studios founded after 1930 were housed in buildings designed for other purposes.<sup>4</sup> Film-makers and critics slowly began to recognise the potential of shooting on location, not just as a way of saving money and relieving some of the burden from the over-crowded and under-funded studio system, but also as a means of imposing a greater degree of authenticity on a film. Studio production did not suddenly grind to a halt in France, but there was a parallel development of alternative schools of film-making which were influenced by nineteenth-century traditions of Impressionist painting and literary naturalism. One of the most important presences in this nascent cinematic genre was André Antoine, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond Borde, "'The Golden Age': French Cinema of the '30s'", trans. by Catherine A. Surowiec, in *Rediscovering French Film*, ed. by Mary Lea Bandy (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983), pp. 67-81 (p. 67).

<sup>4</sup> See Léon Barsacq, *Le Décor de film* (Paris: Seghers, 1970), p.138. These buildings included antiques display rooms and coach-building workshops.

following section of his 1917 article in *Le Film* is worth quoting *in extenso* as it anticipates many of the fundamental decisions facing film-makers in the early 1930s:

Le vrai progrès serait d'abandonner l'atelier de prise de vue, de travailler sur nature comme l'ont fait les Impressionnistes. Au lieu d'improviser un milieu factice devant l'appareil, il faudrait porter l'opérateur et ses instruments devant des intérieurs et des constructions vrais, établir pour s'éclairer des groupes électrogènes mobiles [...] Pour les décors, les meubles, les accessoires, nous suivons toujours les vieux errements. On présente à l'objectif des objets parfaitement réfractaires à la photographie. Nous continuons à fabriquer des décors de théâtre. Or, tel décor, tel meuble satisfaisant à l'éclairage de la rampe, devient inacceptable à l'atelier de prise de vues [...] Le perfectionnement qui va s'imposer est l'indispensable suppression, même et surtout pour les intérieurs, de tout le travail dans nos studios, qui ne devraient être qu'exceptionnellement utilisés pour les trucages, les essais, etc. [...] Afin de bouger le moins possible, on construit et on peint à grands frais, avec des pertes de temps énormes, des intérieurs toujours défectueux. La logique ne serait-elle pas d'aller les chercher où ils sont! L'éternelle objection, tant de fois répétée, de la lumière insuffisante et des obstacles de recul pour la prise de vues, n'est-elle pas inopérante à l'heure où le perfectionnement de notre outillage électrique permet toutes les innovations. Par-là, on marquerait enfin la différence essentielle du cinéma qui est création vivante aérée avec le théâtre dont le principe est au contraire l'imitation de la nature.<sup>5</sup>

Primarily concerned with the specificity of cinema *vis à vis* theatre, the essay is an important entry-point into any discussion of the location/studio dialectic. Antoine's work in translating naturalist practices from fiction to theatre - exemplified in the Théâtre Libre (1887-1897) and the Théâtre Antoine (1897-1906) - had been a defining influence on several young film-makers. He argued that as soon as the camera was able to move, stage design was no longer suited to the film medium. Film decor, whether built in the studio or on location, had to conform to spatio-temporal rhythms as opposed to the theatrical sets rooted to an individual play's constraints. Although the component elements of film were consistent with other art forms (lighting, acting, sound), film's determining elements, without which film as a

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<sup>5</sup> Philippe Esnault, 'Propos d'Antoine', *La Revue de Cinéma*, 271 (April 1973), pp. 38-9 (pp. 38-9). A connection can be made between Antoine's 1920 film *L'Hirondelle et la mésange* and *L'Atalante*. The former is set on a barge on the canals of Belgium and northern France. Despite the melodramatic plot centred on a smuggling ring and the awkward acting style of the non-professional cast, Antoine's insistence on location filming and a prominent interaction between plot and rural landscape anticipates Vigo's own film, and more implicitly, the tone and filming style of poetic realism.



*medium* could not exist, such as framing, angles, editing and set design were necessary to create the illusion or sensation of moving through space. Antoine, who had previously argued that theatrical sets should be made as true to life as possible, also maintained that the way cinema would convince the audience of the verisimilitude of the action and space that it presented should be achieved through an insistence on location shooting. Like the rejection of painted backcloths and the embracing of a physical reality in theatre, cinema would likewise acquire authenticity by turning away from the studio. Not only was this seen as an economically viable alternative to the depleted state of the wartime French film industry, but for Antoine it represented the *sine qua non* for the greatest attainable degree of truthfulness, accounting in part for the initial convergence of *verism* into early French realist cinema. The portability of equipment and the veracity of the landscape saw film-makers move out of the studio and favour location shooting. Ultimately, filming on location became a viable financial and artistic response to the industry's failing infrastructure, and in 'pictorialist-naturalist' films like *L'Homme du large* (1920), *L'Appel du sang* (1920), *Jocelyn* (1922) and *La Brière* (1925), Marcel L'Herbier, Louis Mercanton, Léon Poirier and Jacques de Baroncelli employed non-professional actors and imbued their natural exteriors with the lyrical presence of the landscape and an atmospheric grasp of natural space. This nascent tradition of neo-realism *avant la lettre* was also perpetuated by French documentarists such as Carné and Vigo, whose films *Nogent*, *Eldorado du dimanche* (1929) and *A propos de Nice* (1930) combined a lyrical understanding of rural and urban landscape and a depiction of the *petites gens* with a strong sense of documentary realism.

## Decor and the arrival of sound

Remercions le parlant puisqu'il nous délivre de toutes ces étoffes, de ces bibelots, de ces teintes foncées, de ces papiers fleuris, de ces plafonniers style 'Art décoratif' et des surfaces chocolats dont les films muets s'encombrèrent.<sup>6</sup>

The location tradition diminished in the late 1920s, and the coming of sound saw a subsequent move into the studio. Although film-makers had sought to combine the ultimate *verism* of location shooting with natural sound, it had become increasingly difficult during the early years of the sound revolution to record live sound *en plein air* due to cumbersome technology and vagrant noise. Location shooting may have offered the absolute authenticity of the setting and a presence that could not be faked in any way, but it also contained all the inconveniences of a pre-existing space. Commercial, technical and logistical problems facing those 1930s film-makers who endeavoured to shoot *alfresco* are ritualistically listed in film histories and memoirs: the prohibitive cost of transporting actors, technicians and equipment to remote locations, inadequate electricity sources, traffic problems, the actual location being rarely amenable to stylised remoulding and the difficulty in setting up basic camera and lighting angles. Rather than let filming be determined by conditions that might not be inherently controllable, film-makers were inclined to reconstitute those locations in the studio. A natural landscape may initially seem submissive to a set designer's visual scheme, yet it has its own demands and is not always so willing to be pressed into service. Moreover, it inevitably involves the accommodation of an already existing element into the director's thinking, whereas in the studio, the director can achieve exactly what he needs. The set was a thoroughly controlled

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<sup>6</sup> Lucie Derain, 'Décors et Décorateurs dans le cinéma français, *La Revue de Cinéma*, 27 (1 October 1931), pp. 26-31 (pp. 30-1).

synthetic environment which could be modulated and lit in a variety of ways to evoke a certain mood or atmosphere.

If the camera could no longer go to the city, the answer was unambiguous: bring the city to the camera. The atmospheric totality of poetic realist decor can be closely linked to the development of studio-bound reconstructions of the urban environment and the move into the studio primarily initiated by the coming of sound. From a technological point of view, sound affected not just performance style and the nature of the contract between audience and actor, but all aspects of film-making. Lighting techniques had to be modified, as the conventional arc lamps were noisy and had to be replaced by tungsten lamps, which in turn required better ventilation which in turn created a lot of noise. All external noise had to be eliminated because microphones were omnidirectional and could pick up random sounds, while sound-proof sets had to be constructed as much as possible from acoustically appropriate materials that would not vibrate or bounce sound from other areas. Inside these acoustically isolated sound stages, an artificial but no less authentic depiction of the city could be achieved.

As well as privileging a certain kind of narrative cinema and stifling much of the 1920s French avant-garde film movement, the sound revolution helped crystallise the debate over the use of a studio to attain the kinds of atmospheric realism that 1930s French cinema was adopting. The fundamental question was whether sound's arrival had destroyed the naturalism of cinema and the essence of art by requiring the use of the studio. René Clair was openly hostile to the transition, declaring that sound posed an artistic dilemma to cinema because it would lead to the kind of

‘filmed theatre’ that he and others in the 1920s had been trying to move away from.<sup>7</sup> With the coming of sound, Clair argued, avant-garde aesthetics would begin to splinter and fall away, and in all but a few notable exceptions (Buñuel’s *L’Age d’or* (1930) and Cocteau’s *Le Sang d’un poète* (1930)), this was primarily the case. Its arrival was the death-knell for the French avant-garde, effectively ending the cinematic careers of Epstein, Delluc, Dulac and L’Herbier. Their replacements were the likes of Carné, Grémillon and Vigo; film-makers who had spent apprenticeships in documentaries and whose widening interest in the interaction between setting and character necessitated experiments with and mastering of the new sound equipment.

Yet the arrival of sound and the move into the studio did not dissipate cinema’s capacity to imbue the ordinary with the poetic and several stylistic techniques of pre-sound cinema diffused into the 1930s. Most importantly, poetic realism maintained links with the silent cinema through the use of highly constructed environments, reciprocal symbolism and an expressionistic lighting design. Therein lies sufficient justification for why poetic realism cannot be dismissed as having no historico-aesthetic antecedents in its own national cinema. For example, a link should be recognised between the geometric stylisations in L’Herbier’s *L’Inhumaine* and the fastidious arrangement of space favoured by Trauner. Similarly, the depiction of the city in Feuillade’s *Fantômas* (1913-14) and *Les Vampires* (1915) prefigures the *nervenleben* inherent in *Le Quai des brumes* and *Le Jour se lève*. Feuillade’s

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<sup>7</sup> The dispute between René Clair and Marcel Pagnol is often seen as one of the defining cultural debates of the 1930s. Clair wanted to move away from what he saw as ‘filmed theatre’, foreseeing the decline of cinema as an instrument of autonomy, whilst Pagnol (alongside fellow dramatist Sacha Guitry) saw sound as a method of canonising theatre further. In 1929, Clair famously declared ‘Il faut à tout prix que le cinéma demeure un art visuel: l’avènement du dialogue théâtral au cinéma condamnerait irrémédiablement tout ce que j’espérais’ (‘Le Parlant contre le parlant, *Pour Vous*, 57 (19 December 1929), p. 7). A year later, Pagnol claimed that sound would permit a radical restructuring of the cinematic process. (‘Le Film parlant offre à l’écrivain des ressources nouvelles’, *Le Journal* (17 May 1930), p. 1).

influence looms large over poetic realism, for although much of *Les Vampires* was shot on location, the deserted avenues and squares are revealed as the backdrop for and the subject of hidden forces. This interplay between everyday normality and a more profound sense of dislocation and alienation in Feuillade's work also characterises poetic realist narratives, whereby the ordinariness of the city is subverted by unseen ambiguities within its very architecture.

Consequently, far from destroying cinema's capacity to invoke visually symbolic and heightened depictions of reality, the coming of sound created a fertile bedrock for those film-makers ideologically opposed to sound and nostalgic for silence. Clair may have feared that industrial centralisation and commercial imperatives would lead to the liquidation of silent cinema's visual symbolism, and yet the intricate, symbolically-loaded set designs which proliferated in the 1930s arguably enabled film-makers to maintain links with the stylised visual design of silent cinema *whilst simultaneously* foregrounding the newer realism that relied upon reconfigurations of existing reality. To subscribe to Pierre Leprohon's pessimistic claim that the arrival of sound 'agit comme un frein, sur l'art des images, restreint son champ d'expression, sa tendance au rêve, à la fantaisie, au symbole'<sup>8</sup> would be to overlook the extraordinary abundance of fantastical, dreamlike and symbolically-loaded sets throughout the 1930s. The decision by Clair, Carné and Grémillon in particular to marry the aesthetic of visual symbolism to a realistic (i.e. talking) context can be in part justified by this maintaining of the link to 1920s avant-garde cinema. Clair's early sound films do not sacrifice visual virtuosity to sound; instead, the songs and native patois in *A nous la liberté* lend a deeper texture alongside that

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<sup>8</sup> Pierre Leprohon, *Cinquante ans de cinéma français 1895-1945* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1954), p. 109.

film's domineering and symbolic decor. His collaborations with Lazare Meerson see the perfect intertwining of sound and image - the use of popular song and local idiom foregrounded cinema's newest invention, while the mixture of realistic and impressionistic sets, stylised decor fragments and a playful experiment with perspective and geometry maintain the links with silent cinema.

Recognising the interplay between studio, light and sound, Crisp suggests that poetic realism can best be defined as the reconciliation of 'the poetic effects of expressionist lighting, vapor clouds, and night effects with the realist pressures of sound film production'.<sup>9</sup> This implies maintaining a link with silent cinema through a systematic employment of symbolic *mise en scène* and an embracing of new technological developments. Far from neglecting silent cinema's capacity for exaggerated realism or heightened symbolism, poetic realism adopted and adapted them through an excessively expressive set design and fused them into a more realistic structure. Poetic realist film-makers were self-consciously aware that they were drawing on aesthetic currents that were still live at the time, thus ensuring that the legacy of the avant-gardists of the silent era was perpetuated. Although 1930s cinema is not invested with the kind of 'objet-langage' that characterised *Un Chien andalou*, there are nonetheless several attempts to imitate the complex symbolism and webs of association in the decor. Surrealism and the avant-garde had bequeathed audacious visual techniques to the 1930s, and the move into the studio that followed the coming of sound simply adapted these techniques to a new environment.

Ultimately, the uncertainty as to the future of sound cinema meant that

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<sup>9</sup> Colin Crisp, *The Classic French Cinema: 1930-1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; London and New York: Tauris, 1993), p. 338.

commercial imperatives prevailed and a fundamentally conservative cinematic revolution took place. With the mechanical reproduction of the human voice, the French film industry seemed to regress towards a simple imitation of reality, relying on stock literary adaptations and military farces (what Armes called a ‘stylistically anonymous canned theatre’<sup>10</sup>) that embraced the new technology. Accordingly, it was only after sound had been introduced in France that cinema was able to move closer towards the form of realism that Hollywood had already codified as classic, and that to some extent ‘sound can be considered responsible for shifting film-making towards studio production rather than location and towards realism rather than toward modernism’.<sup>11</sup>

### **Studio shooting**

For Léon Barsacq, the key year in the evolution of set design in French cinema is 1908. It was at this point that ‘vrais meubles remplacent les meubles peints à même le décor [et] les décorateurs cherchent [...] à transformer le décor peint en décor construit’.<sup>12</sup> The camera had hitherto been an immobile spectator of a film’s action, with a static viewing position comparable to theatre’s proscenium arch, a decor no more ambitious than a painted backcloth or minimal black-box design and a simple

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<sup>10</sup> Roy Armes, *French Cinema* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1985), p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> Crisp, p. 104.

<sup>12</sup> Barsacq, p. 206.

prop added when the plot demanded it.<sup>13</sup> After 1908, the camera was removed from the tripod and entered the action, moving around, between and through objects. Consequently, this shift away from theatrical and literary 'black box' adaptations meant that the illusion of reality could not only be maintained but also substantially strengthened. By moving away from early cinema's flatness and two-dimensionality, epitomised by painted backcloths, directors were constantly attempting to vivify space; to release it from stage-bound stasis and inaugurate staging in depth and an appearance of three-dimensionality.

Similarly, in his early essay on set design, Léon Moussinac argued that although film decor is initially a static presence, it must also present itself 'sous les aspects les plus divers et les plus vivants, dans son ensemble ou dans ses détails, de façon à animer, lui aussi, les scènes, chaque fois qu'il peut ajouter à l'émotion ou au comique de l'action'.<sup>14</sup> In one of the first important proclamations on the importance of the studio-bound decor, Moussinac suggests that by being in total control of where the camera moves within the built space, a two-way pact is created between camera and decor. On the one hand, a well-designed decor permits the camera to explore, to move around and pace out the space; on the other, the decor can be privileged, exerting a powerful symbolic presence. In this respect, both Barsacq and Moussinac anticipate the newly acquired materiality of set design. It was not enough

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<sup>13</sup> Visual art was crucial to early realist and expressionist cinematic traditions. The realist spectacles of American cinema owed much to the detailed naturalism of nineteenth-century painting. For example, the meticulous luxury of *Ben Hur* (1925) was deeply indebted to painters such as Jean-Leon Gérôme who had delighted nineteenth-century audiences with his recreations of Ancient Rome. This tradition was adopted by Ridley Scott, whose Coliseum and Senate sets in *Gladiator* (2000) are directly influenced by Gérôme. Similarly, German Expressionism eschewed naturalist painting and instead made the painted, constructed nature of the world explicit. In *Caligari*, the sets made no attempt to suspend disbelief or create an on-screen reality, and the phrase 'Caligarism' was coined to describe any film which relied upon excessively stylised and deliberately anti-naturalistic painted backcloths. I have yet to encounter any extensive study on the painted backcloth tradition and feel further research on this area would prove highly fruitful.

<sup>14</sup> Léon Moussinac, 'Le Décor et le Costume', *Panoramique du cinéma* (Paris: Sans Pareil, 1929), pp. 100-3 (p. 101).



just for the camera to move, pacing out the size and intricacy of the decor - the decor had to keep as close as possible to reality. It was no longer sufficient simply to construct a door that shook every time it was opened, much less tolerate a door painted onto a backcloth. A door had to be built from sturdy material which would fulfil not only a decorative and functional role, but would also offer itself up to intense scrutiny from the camera and the spectator. The increased materiality of studio-bound decor facilitated the creation of spatial depth on a plane surface which in turn produced a synthesis between man and the world about him through the movements of the camera. Through this vivifying of the decor, pro-filmic space was 'smitten into life'<sup>15</sup> and the process effected a more substantial transferral of human emotion onto cinematic objects and design fragments. These decor properties could only be effectively achieved in a studio, where the level of economic, technical and artistic control afforded the film-maker and designer was the ideal starting point for conceptualising claustrophobic urban spaces.

Unlike location shooting, filming in the studio enabled maximum control over environmental factors. Laborious tasks such as clearing the public from the shooting area, isolating unwanted noises (such as traffic, passing trains and overhead planes) and transporting the actors and technicians from one location to another were avoided. Moreover, by filming everything under one roof, costs were exponentially lower, as location shooting consistently exceeded the cost of studio hire and set construction. Max Douy has declared that raw materials and set construction would often constitute a quarter or even a third of a film's budget compared with the five or ten per cent today. He argued that although this in no way curtailed the use of the

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<sup>15</sup> Hermann G. Scheffauer, 'The Vivifying of Space', in *Introduction to the Art of the Movies*, ed. by Lewis Jacobs (New York: Octagon, 1970), pp. 76-85 (p. 77).

studio or prevented the construction of lavish decors, it did mean that a well-planned blueprinting of a film in advance was necessary to ensure that no money was wasted.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, if ‘poetics’ and the aestheticisation of reality were the dominant mode of a film’s *mise en scène* and of importance to the director, then studio recreations were financially viable. French designers have spoken at length about the endlessly re-usable and re-negotiable supply of raw materials they could draw on when necessary. Several studios ‘disposaient d’un stock important d’éléments de décors dans lesquels on pouvait librement puiser pour les adapter à nos besoins [...] On le sortait du stock, on le retapait, on faisait un jeu d’assemblage et le tour était joué’.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, although supplies of raw materials and amounts of available studio space were limited, the judicious use and re-use of what was obtainable meant that the reconstituting of a studio-based reality became an increasingly common alternative throughout the 1930s. Although no detailed study was ever undertaken to compare expenditure on a studio- or location-shot film, the general consensus was that location shooting, with all the incidental costs attached to transporting goods, equipment and personnel to often remote areas, was much higher. Whether true or not, it was sufficiently potent a hypothesis to maintain studio shooting as the norm up to and beyond the 1940s.

The move into the studio also increased the importance of expressionist lighting in the development of the poetic realist aesthetic. A manipulation of light and shadow, space and depth were fundamental in creating an emotionally charged visual arena for the action of a film, and it was much easier in a studio to control and stylise the light source. Impressive studio-bound urban reconfigurations provided little impact

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<sup>16</sup> Jean-Pierre Berthomé, ‘Entretien avec Max Douy (1)’, *Positif*, 244-5 (July-August, 1981), pp. 2-12. (p. 4).

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Pierre Berthomé, *Alexandre Trauner: décors de cinéma* (Paris: Jade-Flammarion, 1988), p. 24.

if they were not lit accordingly - in the same way that the decor carries a powerful emotional freight, so too was controlled lighting an integral semiotic indicator of states of mind.

Its tradition in 1930s French cinema was inherited from German Expressionist *émigré* cinematographers who recognised the compositional beauty of placing monochromatic template lighting onto the decor and who used light as an amplifier of narrative concerns. Several renowned German cinematographers moved to France post-1933, including Eugene Schüfftan and Carl Courant, who recognised that expressive light and framing could be used to create atmosphere and mood. New industry techniques also increased the expressivity of light. The introduction of a concentrated light source allowed the incorporation of painterly elements of composition, tone and texture whilst simultaneously allowing for a greater mobility and freedom of expression. The introduction of freestanding spotlights in the early 1910s had enabled a more concentrated and distinctive lighting that differentiated the actors from their backgrounds, and this diffused into the studio system. Early cinema had relied on sunlight for illumination, and the sets were built around the reflectors installed to control the levels of brightness and shadow, whereas the new innovations allowed for a far greater precision than the previous diffused vapour lights. Pam Cook uses the terms 'revelation and expression' to underline the artistic consequences of this new film lighting<sup>18</sup>; on the one hand, light could reveal a character, object or space; on the other it could express environment and externalise states of mind as effectively as set design.

French cinematographers, notably Henri Alekan, Jules Kruger and Maurice

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<sup>18</sup> Pam Cook, 'Lighting', in *The Cinema Book*, ed. by Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink, 2nd edn (BFI: London, 1999), pp. 53-4 (p. 53).

Thiriet, subsequently adopted these stylised techniques. The use of aggressive shadowing of grills, bars and window frames which were then projected onto objects and people in such a way as to defamiliarise them was a core compositional element of poetic realist *mise en scène* and could only have been achieved in the controlling environment of the studio. The isolation and foregrounding of the decor through aggressive spotlighting and the play of light on fog created a psycho-physiological climate in which objects, characters and set design were all shrouded in indeterminacy.

Furthermore, the technological developments in commercial film stock enabled the somewhat crude contrasts of monochromatic film to give way to the nuance of panchromatics and a deeper use of chiaroscuro. As exemplified in *Le Quai des brumes*, it was the rain-splashed pavement, one of poetic realism's most recognisable visual signifiers, that was born out of this development in panchromatics. The strong delineations of the Casbah in *Pépé le Moko* and the false perspective and *trompe l'oeil* backdrops of *Sous les toits de Paris* and *Drôle de drame* also evolved from these developments in lighting; the theatrical effects of poetic realism were heightened and made more prominent by the inherent visuality of the decor. For directors like Chenal and Carné, the sets are conceived precisely to be lit in an expressionistic way, because poetic realism is an accentuated realism that could be stylised, simplified or made to stand apart from its 'real life' counterpart - for example, the Paris streets in *Les Portes de la nuit* function as much as signifier as signified. By lighting the cobblestones in a certain way, Carné is able to structure his narrative around the interaction of set and light. This development of panchromatic film in the 1930s facilitated a greater control and use of shadow and

light, and the 'brillances', 'pavés luisants' and 'gammes de gris' of poetic realism was undoubtedly aided by these new laboratory and chemical processes.<sup>19</sup>

Most crucially, the studio facilitated the ability to pattern the representation of reality in ways unattainable on location. The inherent artificiality of poetic realism's set design enabled the poeticisation of reality, whereas when a set designer shot on location, he would be afforded considerable freedom (because the existing landscape can be rearranged) *but only up to a certain point*.<sup>20</sup> In an extensive interview with Michel Ciment and Isabelle Jordan, Trauner suggested that it was financial considerations and the inclination of the producers which promoted studio-based filming above location work.<sup>21</sup> Yet is Trauner not being slightly disingenuous here? By referring to the economic viability of shooting in a studio, Trauner is implicitly distancing himself from the furore over the Barbès metro set in *Les Portes de la nuit*. The lavish representation of the actual places and spaces of a city still suffering material hardship after the Occupation was badly received by public and critics alike, and the film was a commercial failure. At a time of national austerity, the vast spending on the recreation of the metro station smacked of profligacy and artistic hubris. The studio may well have been a financial viability, but for the Carné-Trauner collaboration it also provided a level of security and control that could not have been afforded on location. If 'faking things'<sup>22</sup> is fundamental to the set designer's job, then the studio provided the ideal laboratory conditions for

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<sup>19</sup> See Jean-Pierre Berthomé, 'Entretien avec Max Douy (II)', *Positif*, 246 (September 1981), pp. 22-35 (p. 28).

<sup>20</sup> This is why there is always an art direction or production design credit even on a 100 percent location-shot film, because at the very least, the authentic space is going to have to be altered to fit the director's pre-conceived plan.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Ciment and Isabelle Jordan, 'Entretien avec Alexandre Trauner (I)', *Positif*, 223 (October 1979), pp. 4-19 (p. 14).

<sup>22</sup> Beverly Heisner, *Hollywood Art: Art Direction in the Days of the Great Studios* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 1990), p. 37.

experimenting with artifice and illusion. 1930s directors and designers were inclined to experiment within the confines of the studio, leading them to expand their craft, innovate and open out into uncharted territory. By now being in control of virtually all aspects of the film-making process, the set designer and director were able to obtain a more stylised, personal version of reality, precisely because they had the space, facilities and time to create an accentuated version of it. To control space meant a control of all the constituent elements of the film-making process, which in turn, as Carné and Trauner quickly discovered, initiated a greater control over the narrative and the *mise en scène*.

### **Poetic realism: a location and studio synthesis**

Studio shooting favoured the kind of decor innovations and stylisations already inherent in modernist representations of reality, but where poetic realism arguably went a step further was in its ability to fuse an artificial set design with natural surroundings and exterior shots to substantiate a more integrated, organic reality. Most poetic realist films relied on this synthesis between location shooting and studio work and audience conception of and reaction towards urban space could be heightened through the intermingling of studio-set design and exterior shot. Through this kind of cinematic *collage*, the urban space could be lent an even greater degree of reality. The director and designer could employ one of three principal methods to combine location and studio shooting.

Firstly, a director could employ intertitle and real-life footage of a certain place and then seamlessly move into the studio. *Ménilmontant* (1937) is an unremarkable melodrama, but exploits the classic technique of intertitle to create a strong sense of

geographical fixity. The intertitles inform the spectator that 'Ménilmontant est un vieux faubourg de Paris perché tout en haut de la capitale entre le Père-Lachaise et Belleville' and the text is accompanied by a rapid montage of familiar monuments - churches, courtyards, leafy streets - to further anchor the spectator into a recognisable place.

Secondly, the illusion of location realism in poetic realist decor can be sustained through the use of a *découverte*. Also referred to as 'backing paintings', these magnified photographs of the location exterior would be placed in the studio behind doors and windows to maintain the illusion of real place. Trauner first used a *découverte* in *Remorques* to provide a contiguous backdrop for André's and Yvonne's apartment. By taking photographs of the Brest port, Trauner then enlarged the negatives and placed them behind the set. Up until this point, he had relied on painted backcloths or forced perspective to maintain the illusion between studio and real-life. Even the largest or most unwieldy of locations could be domesticated and brought into the controlled confines of the studio. Before the *découverte*, filmmakers had relied upon painted backcloths or had avoided the issue through the judicious placing of net curtains or heavy drapes. However, in poetic realism, the *découverte* allowed the homogeneity of the shot to be respected and the reality effect to be greatly increased.

I have designated the final process 'pictorial importing'. Whereas Clair's *Sous les toits de Paris* is an explicitly studio-bound conception of the capital, Georges Lacombe's *Jeunesse* (1934) takes the synthesis between real and built one stage further. The film is heavily influenced by Clair - its use of streets and song is introduced in the first shot, as are the high angled shots looking down onto the community - yet where Lacombe goes further is in his use of pictorial insertings to

establish a far more genuine Parisian landscape. The location shots of the metro and the Eiffel Tower privileges visual reality over poetic document. This is not to say that *Jeunesse* is more realistic than *Sous les toits de Paris* (indeed, once the action moves to the *quartier* the Eiffel Tower looks conspicuously artificial), but by replicating in extensive detail an existing *topos* with the aid of pictorial importing, the film can map its narrative concerns onto a genuine Parisian milieu. It allowed film-makers to induce a greater degree of actuality in their work, simultaneously elevating the narrative to a level of poetry. The integration of real urban footage could be just as beneficial to the creation of a claustrophobic or atmospheric milieu as a studio-bound reconstruction, and this pictorial importing subsequently became an integral part of the poetic realist narrative. Not only do 'real life' inserts offer authentic establishing shots of a specific time or place but they also make explicit the link between reality and artifice inherent in poetic realism.<sup>23</sup>

Poetic realism is predicated upon this pictorial importing, employing it as a shorthand metonymy. By integrating stock footage of the locale, the viewer is primed as to their location. These establishing shots are numerous - the Eiffel Tower tells us we are in Paris, back-projected palm trees tell us we are somewhere exotic - but are generally brief. Once introduced and 'recognised', the film-maker will employ a dissolve to transport the action inside an obvious studio set. Inside the studio, the metonymy is sustained, usually through a projected backdrop which substantiates and consolidates the reality effect.

Although these atmospheric inserts had become common in French cinema after

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<sup>23</sup> The use of 'pictorial importing' was also common in *film noir*, capitalising on audience's familiarity with documentary newsreels shown in cinemas during and after World War Two. Examples include *The Big Clock* (1948), *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), *Night and the City* (1950), and, perhaps most famously, *The Third Man* (1949). The importing is not just a specific link between reality and artifice, but is also a metaphor for the 'honesty and duplicity' narrative motifs of *film noir*.



about 1920 (L'Herbier's *L'Homme du large* and Delluc's *Fièvre* (1921) are early examples, the former containing a number of inserts of clouds and waves, the latter shots of Marseilles docks), they only became a widespread practice with the development of poetic realism. In *Remorques* there is a constant interplay between the rugged Breton coast and the Trauner's highly stylised interiors; Carné had inserted authentic shots of the Le Havre docks into the studio-bound set in *Le Quai des brumes* (recalling *Fièvre*); and Duvivier's documentary montage at the beginning of *Pépé le Moko* articulated the symbiosis between synthetic reconstructions of the Casbah and authentic exterior shots of the same place. Likewise, in *Les Portes de la nuit*, Trauner's designs replicate in exact and extensive detail an existing *topos*, privileging visual reality over poetic document. This intention is signalled by the documentary panoramas of northern Paris which frame the film and the voice-over that explicitly informs the audience of time and place. This pictorial importing is frequently pressed into service for the depiction of Paris streets. The location shooting could emphasise the film-maker's poetic awareness of the street and could be adopted to capture the everyday images of urban life and set up aesthetic correspondences between location realism and the transcendental studio-bound poetry. Recurrent images of shop fronts, bustling streets and town squares that were traditionally associated with Parisian urban life became metonymic figures of the city: these people and places *were* the city, and by capturing them *tout court*, traditional urban iconographies could be emotionalised. Through the interplay between real and constructed, these films all assume super-naturalistic qualities, while at the same time always being careful to anchor the spectator to a definite time and place.

The following examination of the various spatial configurations and architectonics Renoir and Carné employ in their films will enable an identification of the ways in which they combine location and studio shooting to create their individual spatial arenas.

## **Jean Renoir**

1930s poetic realism is the presentation of reality not captured but transposed. Although an apt summation of the stylisation of Carné, Duvivier, Grémillon, Vigo and Clair, it is not an adequate umbrella-term for Renoir, who preferred a realism based on knowing ‘exactly where to place his camera’.<sup>24</sup> His stylisation of the real emanated not from any conscious attempt at visual accentuation, but from the sheer quality and spontaneity of his observation. This is not entirely accurate should we examine the meticulously designed decor for *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, but his 1930s films are undoubtedly grounded much more in a documentary-style approach (Toni 1934); location shooting (the exterior scenes in *La Grande illusion* (1937) and *La Règle du jeu* (1939)) and an absence of visually connotative sets that dominate the films of other directors of this period. While the demands of new sound equipment had forced many directors back into the studio in the early 1930s, Renoir on the other hand embraced the new technology as it enabled him to delve deeper below the surface of exterior things to reveal a deeper meaning beneath. He was facilitated by the development of new, lighter cameras which enabled a far greater mobility. By 1934, André Debrie had developed the 1908 Parvo silent camera into

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<sup>24</sup> Gilbert Adair, *Flickers: An Illustrated Celebration of 100 Years of Cinema* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 84.

the Super Parvo sound camera, while the modification of Caméréclair-Radio by Méry for the Eclair company in 1933 also allowed the simultaneous recording of sound and image on two separate reels of films. These smaller, mobile cameras could record sound at great distances and so location shooting became increasingly effective precisely because the technology had been designed for it.

According to David Thomson, Renoir would trust 'the nature of a place rather than the concocted idea of it'.<sup>25</sup> Whereas Carné was experimenting with the new studio technology and the creation of 'readable' symbolic set designs, Renoir's experiments with pictorialism, location shooting and deep focus were also important innovations in this period, not least because he recognised that the natural landscape could provide an effective backdrop to individual characters given the absolute authenticity inherent in its rendition.

Renoir would have been particularly aware of his pictorial heritage. Although neither are overtly poetic realist films, *La Fille de l'eau* (1924) and *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932) are precursors for a painterly aesthetic which Renoir began to develop more fully in *Une Partie de campagne* (1936) and which would reach its high point in *La Bête humaine* (1938).<sup>26</sup> Renoir père and other Impressionists had painted the Gare Saint-Lazare just as Zola had captured it half a century earlier in his novel *La Bête humaine* and Renoir fils continued this triumvirate of representations in 1938 with the film version of the novel, regarded by some critics as the apotheosis of poetic realism.<sup>27</sup> Both the painterly aesthetic of the Impressionists and the modus

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<sup>25</sup> David Thomson, 'The Art of the Art Director', *American Film*, 2:4 (1977), pp. 12-20 (p. 17).

<sup>26</sup> The two river scenes in *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (when Boudu jumps in the Seine and the wedding party on the Marne) can be directly related back to Impressionist pictures. His father's 1872 picture of the Pont Neuf offers virtually the same view and perspective from Lestingois's window, while Seurat's *Bathers at Asnières* foreshadows the pastoral idyll of the riverside at the end of the film.

<sup>27</sup> Dudley Andrew refers to the film as the 'apogee of poetic realism' which 'bathes us in more atmosphere than any Renoir film since *La Nuit du carrefour*'. (*Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 304-5).

operandi of 1930s set designers were similar: the desire to convey the sprawl of the metropolis, the importance of the human figure amidst an urban decor and the fastidious arrangement of space.

Renoir was also sensitive to the interaction between real and artificial, and his 1930s cinema is characterised by a stark interface between location and studio shooting, setting him apart from directors like Duvivier, Chenal and most explicitly Carné. All of Renoir's 1930s works from *Toni* (1934) to *La Règle du jeu* (1939) are arguably both 'poetic' and 'realist', but there is no single common paradigm that his work encompasses. Terms like 'nature' and 'theatre' sit more comfortably with his 1930s corpus and several critics have observed how Renoir's cinema was concerned with these dual themes.<sup>28</sup> The recurrence of these dialectics act as important structuring metaphors for his cinema. There is a narrative reliance upon and an aestheticisation of the natural environment that hark back to and are distilled from his father's painterly influence (*Toni*, *Une Partie de campagne*, the final sequences of *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* and *La Grande illusion*), juxtaposed to a studio-based exploration of the inherent theatricality and performativity of human nature (whether the farcical *jeux de portes* in *La Règle du jeu*, the cross-dressing in *La Grande illusion*, or the satirical interactions between Boudu (Michel Simon) and the Lestingois household (Charles Granval, Marcelle Hainia and Severine Lerczynska)). Renoir exploits the dynamics of the struggle between reality and studio, and when he combines the two, marrying exterior and interior, the reality effect is heightened, the narrative strengthened and Antoine's aforementioned notion of cinema as 'airy' effected.

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<sup>28</sup> See Leo Braudy, *Jean Renoir: The World of his Films* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), p. 19. Braudy astutely acknowledges that Renoir's first two films as a director, *La Fille de l'eau* (1926) and *Nana* (1926) are predicated on the central ideas of nature and theatre respectively.

In his memoirs, Eugène Lourié recalls how the interior scenes in the castle in *La Grande illusion* were impossible to film on location. As the configurations and sizes of the rooms in the castle were too awkward, Renoir 'preferred shooting under the controlled conditions of a stage', convinced that studio sets could be 'more dramatically expressive and fit the story better than some actual locations'.<sup>29</sup> Here we see an example of how working within the tightly controlled environment of the studio facilitated greater spatial control and the opportunity for a more expressive *mise en scène*. Such logistic decisions also impinged on *La Bête humaine*, where the sets combined real and miniaturised scaled-down buildings with diminishing perspectives at Billancourt. Lourié scouted several buildings bordering the exit from the Gare St. Lazare, and it was from the window of one of these stairways that the shot from the window of the Roubaud's Parisian apartment is taken. Director and designer then oversaw the construction of a corresponding inner set on a studio-stage and the final result is a seamless stitching of location and studio to form an organic and totally verisimilitudinous space.

A slightly different variation of this synthesis is exemplified in *La Règle du jeu*, where the exteriors of the La Colinière chateau are at La Ferté Sainte-Aubin in the Sologne, while built studio sets at Joinville provide the spatial arena in which Renoir employs his trademark deep focus, sweeping camera movements and clinical observation of the individual comings and goings. In the film, he initially makes transparent the schism between location and studio by immediately dissolving to an exterior scene as the various guests enter the chateau. By delaying the obvious

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<sup>29</sup> Eugène Lourié, *My Work in Films* (San Diego, New York and London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), p. 12. In an extension of person/environment nexus in cinematic spatialisations, Lourié writes that Erich von Stroheim's personality strongly influenced his design conceptions and executions. A useful example of this is the layout of von Rauffenstein's room and its position at the highest point of the prison camp, which in turn echoes his words 'Personne ne s'échappera de cette forteresse. Personne.'

transition from real to fake, Renoir substantiates his attempt at creating a seamless interchange between one space and another. Later on, he eventually inscribes the artificial nature of the decor into the diegesis by filming the different arrivals at La Colinière as a prologue, using a rainstorm to reinforce the difference between the world outside and the space of the diegesis in the chateau. By reminding the audience at this point that the events are taking place inside an artificial space, Renoir plays on the nature of the constructed set and the real exteriors which fill the mid-section of the film, and hints at the 'game' symbolism that dominates the second half.

A set might well dominate the action within it, but the dimensions of Renoir's decor allow considerable latitude as to the unfolding of the action and the range of his cinematic grammar allows the decor to be privileged or organically harmonised in a variety of ways.

Although there are still debates as to whether Renoir pioneered the technique before Welles, deep focus refers to the range of distance within which objects appear in sharp focus.<sup>30</sup> Distinct from but related to depth of field, which applies to the focal length a particular lens can apply (greater depth of field is provided by a wide lens), Stephen Tiffet has suggested that the deep focus technique affords the spectator democratised access to cinematic representation, because the technique 'allows the spectator's eye to play over the cinematic space at will, focusing on whatever plane

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<sup>30</sup> Barry Salt has categorically denied the use of deep focus in Renoir's cinema. Instead there is 'just extensive use of staging in depth' (Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* (London: Starword, 1983), p. 269).

of action interests it'.<sup>31</sup> By relinquishing control to the spectator and providing them with the opportunity to choose whatever detail within the frame interests them, the technique grants unmediated access to an authentic reality. Unlike Carné's films, where everything is closely framed and selected by the camera and its symbolic or spatial significance reinforced by Trauner's set design, Renoir's use of depth of field and deep focus allows for a greater visual field and a less pre-ordained opening-out of space. Throughout the 1930s, Renoir found that the exploration of cinematic space would be more interesting if people were arranged in depth rather than placed side by side. As early as 1931 in *La Chienne*, the sets were designed to emphasise the deep focus: the window of the Legrand house opened out onto a narrow courtyard, and through the windows of the neighbouring apartment can be glimpsed a woman doing housework and a girl playing the piano. Using architectural devices such as windows, doors and corridors, Renoir's deep staging technique enhanced the film's naturalistic environment and through the frame-in-a-frame device, permitted a deeper exploration of discovery, comings-and-goings and voyeurism. When Legrand (Michel Simon) discovers that Lulu (Janie Marèze) is sleeping with Dédé (Georges Flament), the camera is positioned first behind Legrand, picking up the lovers on the bed through the door. The camera then cuts to the exterior of the house and observes the scene through the window.

Two further examples of this fusion between spatial mobility and narrative development occur in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*. The first is the shot of the advertising hoarding being taken down from Charles's window. As the sunlight streams in through the window, we see Charles (Maurice Baquet) in the foreground

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<sup>31</sup> Stephen Tofft, 'Theatre in the Round: The Politics of Space in the Films of Jean Renoir', *Theatre Journal*, 39 (October 1987), pp. 328-46 (p. 330).

and Estelle (Nadia Sibirskaja), his beloved, clearly visible in the background. By allowing the camera to unite them across the microcosm of the courtyard, Renoir plays the foreground off against the background.<sup>32</sup> This effect of fusing faraway and close is modified in the famous 360° pan at the end of the film when Lange shoots Batala (Jules Berry). The sweeping camera binds the spectator to the action and highlights the tightly knit space of this enclosed community. In the first instance, Renoir employs a deep focus shot for the action at the periphery or background of the courtyard; in the latter, the pan is the rational option for all action observed from the centre of the courtyard. Subject to numerous deconstructions and politicisations, the shooting of Batala is a powerful exemplar of the way in which spatial configurations can be reinterpreted through the movement of a camera that simultaneously shows us the space and transforms its meaning.<sup>33</sup>

Likewise, although long and mobile takes were commonplace in 1930s French cinema, it was Renoir who combined them to greatest effect. Stephenson and Phelps regard the tracking shot as a way of embodying ‘the spatial expression of a gradual growth of ideas or emotion’<sup>34</sup>, while Bazin compares Renoir’s unfettered camera to that of Murnau. Both film-makers, he argues, are concerned with ‘des exemples de mouvement d’appareil ainsi libéré du personnage et de la géométrie dramatique’.<sup>35</sup> Certainly Murnau’s *Sunrise* (1927) prefigures several aesthetic and technical strands in Renoir’s oeuvre. The trolley sequence is a key example of the way in which spatial mobility is clearly linked with the possibilities of the new cinematic medium

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<sup>32</sup> Renoir was experimenting with deep focus and depth of field several years prior to cinematographer Gregg Toland’s use of the same techniques in *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946).

<sup>33</sup> See André Bazin, *Jean Renoir* (Paris: Lebovici, 1989), pp. 40-2 and Keith Reader, ‘The Circular Ruins? Frontiers, Exile and the Nation in Renoir’s *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*’, *French Studies*, 54:3 (2000), pp. 287-97 (pp. 290-3). Reader asserts that the 360° pan is in fact ‘nearer 270°’.

<sup>34</sup> Ralph Stephenson and Guy Phelps, *The Cinema As Art*, rev. edn (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 76.

<sup>35</sup> Bazin, p. 82.



in conveying the haphazardness and indiscriminancy of urban life. Lucy Fischer notes how the trolley crosses both geographical and psychological borders in the characters' lives; the use of the trolley is a metaphor for film's ability to connect one space with another.<sup>36</sup> Roving cameras also figure highly in Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (1927) and Vertov's *Man With A Movie Camera* (1929). Both films are early attempts to shape filmic space into a cohesive and architectural whole and ultimately succeed in capturing the hectic modernity of cityscapes.

While Duvivier and Carné often employ the traditional shot composition of reverse-angles, Renoir's films are much more reliant on camera movement. *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932), *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1935), and *La Règle du jeu* (1939) are all examples of this spatial mobility. Durnat notices how Renoir's 'split-focus long shots and nimbly acrobatic trackings and pannings invest the interiors with the open space of exteriors'.<sup>37</sup> Like the majority of Renoir's oeuvre, the camera is in constant flux, negotiating the decor in a complex and multi-dimensional way. The technique avoids excessive cutting and allows Renoir to treat a sequence as a dramatic whole rather than a series of fragments. By starting off with a general scene and then steadily moving so as to concentrate on or accentuate further a particular object of dramatic importance, the tracking shot involves a kind of selection process followed by a progressive elimination of the unnecessary. This is typified by the track along von Rauffenstein's room in *La Grande illusion*. By picking out objects and pausing momentarily to allow the spectator to take in their significance, Renoir adds a deeper texture to decor and character before von Rauffenstein (Erich von Stroheim) has been introduced. His pictorial sense is

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<sup>36</sup> Fischer also notes that it was Murnau's technical virtuosity and innovative camera movements in *Der Letzte Mann* (1924) that was one of the principal reasons that he was invited to Hollywood to film *Sunrise*. (Lucy Fischer, *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (London: BFI, 1998) p. 54).

<sup>37</sup> Raymond Durnat, *Jean Renoir* (London: Vista, 1975), p. 90.

frequently expressed in the attention he pays to the importance of individual things in relation to one another. In this case, a slow, sweeping camera move can pace out the totality of the built space but also economise on extraneous exposition.

### *La Nuit du carrefour* (1932)

“Atmosphere” is sometimes assumed to be a merely superficial quality, but it arises from an amalgam of sensuous experience and poetic reminiscence; a balance of feelings, not an absence of them. And balance implies structure. The film is impregnated with air, light, liquid, stone, fabric and flesh.<sup>38</sup>

Generally given short shrift in French cinema histories, *La Nuit du carrefour* is an important constituent of the Renoir *oeuvre*. Despite the often incomprehensible plot, the infamous missing three reels reportedly lost by Jean Mitry after shooting and the awkward juxtaposition of acting styles, the film is an early precursor of poetic realism. Shot on location (the cast and crew spent three weeks at a crossroads near Bouffémont, twenty-five kilometres north of Paris), the film is seen and heard through a glass darkly. Its narrative, based on Simenon’s novel, centres on a murder at a lonely crossroads. The only locations are a few forlorn houses, a bistro and a garage and Renoir imbues these action spaces with the hallucinatory, poetic qualities of *Le Quai des brumes* and *Le Jour se lève*. Critics acknowledged the atmospheric realism - both the *Pour Vous* and *New York Times* reviews concentrated on the film’s painterly qualities; for the former, the ‘teintes noyées’ and the ‘grisailles’ which were remarkable for ‘d’intensité, de beauté décorative, de poésie’<sup>39</sup>, whilst Tom

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<sup>38</sup> Durgnat, p. 77.

<sup>39</sup> Jean Barreyre, in Roger Viry-Babel, *Jean Renoir: Le jeu et la règle* (Paris: Denoël, 1986), p. 63.

Milne concluded that the film was, 'Weird, hallucinatory and oddly poetic, prefigur[ing] the treacherous perspectives of the later *film noir*.'<sup>40</sup>

In this respect, the film's all-consuming mist foreshadows Carné's use of fog as pathetic fallacy in *Le Quai des brumes* and was recognised by several reviews of the time as the film's most compelling constituent:

La pluie et le brouillard confèrent bien entendu une étrangeté qui n'est pas une simple volonté poétique de bon aloi, mais la traduction littéraire de ce que Renoir via Simenon tente de dire: les choses ne sont jamais données ou acquises, derrière elles se dissimule la seule réalité des passions ou de la nature humaine.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, for all the film's location realism, *La Nuit du carrefour* is concerned less with the creation of a contiguous space than with the pictorial effects that individual action spaces can create. The film bridges the gap between the atmospheric writing of nineteenth-century naturalism and 1930s poetic realism to the extent that Cauliez has commented that for Renoir, 'Le réalisme n'est plus qu'un adjuvant; c'est la poésie qui l'emporte.'<sup>42</sup> What the film above all highlights is the development of the 'action space' aesthetic that began to permeate the cinema at this early point. By using location shooting and relying upon the hallucinatory quality of everyday objects (most significantly the two bottles of poisoned beer slipped through a window), Renoir was able to charge his narrative with something more substantial than the perfunctory screenplay initially offered. His place-making ability - the garage, the bistro and the houses clinging to the crossroads - permits a far deeper dissection of the narrative and scrutiny of the characters. The sparse 'real-ness' of

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<sup>40</sup> Tom Milne, *Time Out Film Guide*, ed. by John Pym, 8th edn. (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 750.

<sup>41</sup> Barreyre, in Viry-Babel, p. 60.

<sup>42</sup> Armand-Jean Cauliez, *Jean Renoir* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1962), p. 32.

the action spaces and the sense of poetry distilled from the banal is an impressive synthesis.

This poeticisation of the diegesis through a synthesis of expressionistic set design and authentic real life inserts continues throughout many of his 1930s films. *La Nuit du carrefour* combined the location realism of a real crossroads and garage with artificial interiors and as such was a precursor of poetic realism in that the location realism broke with conventional interpretations of how the 'real' should be constituted. The film was successful in combining location and studio shooting, attaining a kind of double-layered reality based on the one hand on accurate renditions of urban spaces, and on the other on documentary-style capturing of 'real life'.

## Marcel Carné

In a studio, nothing is left to chance: if a raised cobblestone catches the light from a streetlamp, it is because Trauner wanted the cobblestone and Schüfftan aimed a spotlight at it. Carné's cinema does not reproduce reality, it produces its own reality, by consensus.<sup>43</sup>

Dubbed a 'megalomaniac of decor' by André Bazin, Marcel Carné's totalising concept of film-making highlights how his films were highly constructed. This lack of spontaneity emphasised by Jeancolas was already part of the discourse nearly a decade before *Le Quai des brumes*. In 1928, Louis Chavance argued that decor had become increasingly pre-planned, a decision 'qui supprime le choix et

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<sup>43</sup> Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, 'Beneath the Despair, the Show goes on: Marcel Carné's *Les Enfants du paradis* (1943-5)', trans. by Marianne Johnson, in *French Film: Texts and Contexts*, 2nd edn, ed. by Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 78-88 (p. 79).

l'improvisation au moment de tourner.' Yet Chavance implicitly understood that if a director (in this case René Clair) shows the audience a certain scene from a certain distance, it was because 'il *ne devait absolument pas faire autrement* étant donné le sentiment qu'il voulait exprimer.'<sup>44</sup> Even a director like Clair was acutely aware that a highly conceived studio decor was required in order to foreground the narrative.

Similarly, Carné's fundamental reliance on the built environment and the prime importance he accorded the Trauner-designed set was a necessity given the stories he wanted to tell. Whereas Renoir's narratives and spatial configurations can mostly be characterised as 'airy', Carné's narrative and visual style are mostly reliant on cramped, studio-bound spatial configurations in keeping with the romantic-fatalist aspect of his narratives. This reliance upon intimate settings permits objects and decor fragments to be invested with a life of their own, a trend that can be linked to German theatre director Max Reinhardt's development of the *Kammerspielfilm* tradition. This genre of films produced during the early 1920s drew on the conventions of contemporary German theatre and were characterised by claustrophobic settings, strict unity of time and place, and a stylised *mise en scène*.<sup>45</sup> Murnau's films exemplified these attributes, most notably *Der Letzte Mann* (1924), which anticipates several architectural and visual motifs recurrent in Carné's poetic realist films. The story of a hotel doorman (Emil Jannings) demoted to a basement lavatory attendant, Murnau's bleak settings and slow camera movements were distinct correlates to the study of psychological breakdown. Carné has expressed his

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<sup>44</sup> Louis Chavance, 'Le Décorateur et le Métier', *La Revue du Cinéma*, 1 (December 1928), pp. 18-23 (p. 21).

<sup>45</sup> See 'Kammerspielfilm and Stimmung', in Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. by Roger Greaves (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), pp. 177-99.

debt to Murnau's 'langage plastique'<sup>46</sup>, and the spatial configurations of *Le Quai des brumes* and *Le Jour se lève* are recognisably influenced by Murnau and the *Kammerspielfilm* tradition. Both films are characterised by a claustrophobic, fatalist dramaturgy, and a visual style that provided exact correspondences with individual emotion.

His aesthetic style is comparable to Maurice de Vlaminck and there are several thematic and stylistic resonances. As with Carné in *Nogent, Eldorado du dimanche*, de Vlaminck was initially drawn to imitating an Impressionist aesthetic and rendering country scenes in paintings such as *The Barge* (1905) and *Marly-Le-Roi* (1906). Similarly, his later works evoke the urban claustrophobia and chiaroscuro lightplay that typify Carné's poetic realist films: *Montparnasse Crossroads* (1918) is highly cinematic in its use of perspective and a bird's-eye-view shot of the *quartier*, while the lithograph illustration for Raymond Radiguet's book *Le Diable au corps* (1926) evokes strong memories of *Le Quai des brumes*.<sup>47</sup>

In his polemical essay 'La Caméra, personnage du drame', published in 1929, Carné advocated location shooting as a way of elevating the talkie to a newer, more realistic level. By placing the camera on a *chariot* with the intention of a tracking shot, movement within the space could be attained. Carné praised Murnau for his willingness to adapt technological innovation to his cinematic style, using the camera to open out and explore the decor. He recalled Murnau's adoption of the same technique in *Sunrise*, in which the camera 'glissait, s'élevait, planait ou se

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<sup>46</sup> Hélène Climent-Oms, 'Carné parle', *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque*, 5 (Winter 1972), pp. 31-49 (p. 36).

<sup>47</sup> American realist painter Reginald Marsh's compositions also anticipate much of poetic realist iconography. His depictions of 1920s urban American life bear strong resemblance to poetic realism's most enduring images. *Death Avenue*, with its tall tenement block in a largely denuded cityscape, its nearby railway train, its factory chimneys and disillusioned workers foreshadows the visual texture and tone of *Le Jour se lève*.

faufilait partout où l'intrigue le nécessitait [...] devenait "personnage du drame".<sup>48</sup> Carné reasoned that through these various developments and innovations, the movement of the camera coupled with an opening-up and -out of space was a way of showing off the set and making it an object not just of contemplation and action but also of spectacle, of the set possessing a 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. Accomplished enough to take advantage of the specificity of the mobile camera to investigate and privilege his complex spatial configurations, the tracking shot became one of Carné's most recognisable signature motifs, and was perhaps most famously depicted in Feyder's *La Kermesse héroïque*, a film on which Carné acted as creative assistant. In the first three shots of the film, the camera pans the length and breadth of the town square, pacing out the enormity of the Meerson-designed sets and emphasising the space's vitality and sense of community. To recall the openings of Carné's three *chefs-d'oeuvre* is to see how far Feyder's stylistic trait has been appropriated: *Hôtel du Nord* opens with a complex tracking and panning shot, taking in all the surroundings before coming to rest on the suicidal couple, *Le Jour se lève* begins with a static camera, but quickly frees itself up, and through a combination of pans and tracking-shots, explores the architecture and inner dimensions of the *immeuble* that was so prominently visible in the opening establishing shot, while the camera movements at the beginning of *Les Enfants du paradis* are analogous to the spectator's gaze, fleeting and uncertain as to where to look along the vast urban panorama of the Boulevard du Temple. All three offer the ultimate 'trou de serrure'<sup>49</sup>; elements of technological innovation fused with a basic voyeuristic, omniscient appeal that characterises much of Carné's work.

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<sup>48</sup> Marcel Carné, 'La Caméra, personnage du drame', *Cinémagazine* (12 July 1929), repr. in Robert Chazal, *Marcel Carné* (Paris: Seghers, 1965), pp. 87-9 (p. 88).

<sup>49</sup> Attributed to Francis Carco, in Chazal, p. 89.

In Carné's cinema, the long shot is frequently employed to isolate an individual, group or town within the wider landscape and to diminish human scale, placing the individual within the totality of the landscape. The opening sequence of *Les Visiteurs du soir* reinforces this technique, in which the two horse riders are framed against the desert background. The effect is increased by the use of an iris-out, a technique employed in German Expressionist films to pull out from a close-up to a long shot. The ensuing vastness of the landscape is explicitly configured as the dramaturgical arena. The appearance of the immense white castle placed within a largely denuded rural landscape operates in the same way as the *immeuble* in *Le Jour se lève*, immediately becoming the privileged focus of narrative attention.

The perennial problem facing set designers and directors has always been how to strike an equilibrium between spectacle and narrative. If the camera shows a close-up of the human face, then the set is necessarily effaced, or at least miniaturised, whereas if the camera pulls back far enough to view the whole set, the individual will disappear along with all secure sense of scale. In *Intolerance* (1916), Griffith employed a slow advance from the epic to the personal, permitting the space to tell the story. By allowing the camera itself to pace out the enormity of the set, from establishing panorama down to individual figures, he reinforced the totalising aspect of the decor and also foregrounded the indispensable human figure within that space. Carné's built environments function in a similar way. They are necessarily spectacular, the focal point of the entire film, yet they never sacrifice the reality effect to oppressive symbolism but instead harness artificiality into an inherently realistic decor. In this respect, his decor is 'fabriqué mais pas faux'; despite its synthetic nature, it initiates a strong person-environment connection which



highlights the mutual reciprocity between huge structure and authentic human presence.

When, in 1948, Italian director Roberto Rossellini identified Carné as Europe's greatest film-maker, he damned him with faint praise, declaring that he should 'se libère un peu du carcan [vice] du studio, qu'il sorte davantage, qu'il regarde de plus près la figure de la rue'.<sup>50</sup> Rossellini pinpointed the extent to which Carné's spatial and architectonic nexus took precedence over narrative. On the few occasions when he does stray from the 'vice' of studio, his documentary-style pictorial importing - Dany and Lucien (Lisette Lanvin and Albert Préjean) running playfully in a public garden in *Jenny* (1936), the docksides of *Le Quai des brumes*, the Bois de Boulogne in *Les Enfants du paradis* - serves to heighten the reality effect, further poeticising the claustrophobic diegesis and privileging these authentic settings as ironically transient spaces within Carné's predominantly urban environments. Carné's topographical referencing points trace the same trajectory as the Impressionists - the northern arc stretching from the Canal St. Martin to the Batignolles that surfaces most prominently in *Hôtel du Nord* and *Les Portes de la nuit*.

Yet despite seeming evidence to the contrary, it is not a paradox that it was the street that came into the studio. Critics have frequently criticised Carné for not 'going down onto the street', remaining instead in thrall to the studio aspect of his films and the level of control studios afforded him. Claude Mauriac wrote in 1954 that:

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<sup>50</sup> In Chazal, p. 180. Rossellini had used urban location shooting in both *Rome Open City* (1945) and *Germany Year Zero* (1947), and although not every location was as accurate as it claimed to be (some of the latter was filmed on soundstages), the depictions of Rome and Berlin were highly effective because they were authentic.

[L]a matière première du Cinéma, art de la vie, étant la vie même, il n'est pas de plus grave contresens que de tourner dans des décors (aussi fidèles qu'ils puissent être en apparence) les scènes qui sont censées se dérouler à l'extérieur.<sup>51</sup>

Such a radical reimagining of Carné's cinematic influence may be in part due to his devaluation in post-war French intellectual circles, but it effectively reinforces the fundamental contradiction between desiring an authentic location and undermining its effect by incorporating hyper-real props (most explicitly the arrival of a bus at the end of *Hôtel du Nord*) or an excessively stylised *mise en scène* which merely emphasises the artifice of the structure and the incompatibility between real and fake.

Yet in that seminal 1933 essay 'Quand le cinéma descendra-t-il dans la rue?', had not Carné himself concluded that the reality cinema sought to capture was not a simple choice between studio reconstruction and location shooting? He recognised that René Clair's depiction of the capital in *Sous les toits de Paris* was 'si vrai, si juste, émouvant et sensible' *as well as* 'un Paris de bois et de stuc reconstruit à Epinay'.<sup>52</sup> Carné, like Clair, was always searching for a humanism within an artificial setting and sought not to hermetically seal out human vitality through total subordination to artifice, but instead explore the kind of juxtapositions that characterised Clair's cinema. As Carné concluded in the essay:

L'impasse aux chanteurs, la ruelle obscure qui borde le chemin de fer de la Petite Ceinture de *Sous les toits de Paris*, la rue des escaliers, la petite place du bal de *Quatorze Juillet*, quoique nous les sachions fabriqués de toutes pièces, nous émeuvent par leur *criante authenticité*.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> In René Jeanne and Charles Ford, *Paris vu par le cinéma* (Paris: Hachette, 1969), p. 127.

<sup>52</sup> Marcel Carné, 'Quand le cinéma descendra-t-il dans la rue?', *Cinémagazine* (November 1933), repr. in Chazal, pp. 94-6 (p. 95).

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 95. My emphasis.

Critics of the Carné-Trauner collaborations have levelled charges of complicity and ‘staging’ at them, recognising their designs may have a documentary quality about them, but at the same time, everything is meticulously constructed and any possible ‘dead’ space that would diminish the overall aesthetic impact is eliminated. Nothing is invented, everything is imagined. Yet Trauner’s designs of urban spaces are necessarily carefully constructed. Nothing is accidental, nothing can be done quickly, everything must be planned in advance, contrived and designed. This apparent lack of spontaneity in Trauner’s recreations of a *quartier* is offset by the documentary-like depiction of the space. If a cobblestone glistens in the rain in a certain way, it was because Trauner designed the cobblestone and placed it at a certain angle, but this contrivance is never allowed to eliminate the essentially human dramas playing out in the space.

Moreover, isn’t a director free to choose his own truths, to abandon a literal conception of the world we know? A built studio set allows Carné to ‘imposer sa vision des choses au spectateur, de composer un univers en harmonie avec l’action’.<sup>54</sup> Admittedly the fundamental lack of depth in the London streets in *Drôle de drame* is frequently distracting for the viewer, and the ‘pictorial importing’ in *Le Quai des brumes* jars alongside the claustrophobic spaces, but they never detract from the story Carné is telling. His realism always remains *vraisemblable* and through transposition and stylisation, that realism is shifted into the realms of the poetic. Even when the spectator immediately recognises the artificial and synthetic nature of Trauner’s sets, they appreciate that these configurations are frequently

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<sup>54</sup> Pierre Leprohon, *Présences contemporaines* (Paris: Debresse, 1957), p. 128.

‘plus vraie que la vie elle-même’.<sup>55</sup>

**Open and closed film-making**

Leo Braudy argues that there are two modes in which films present the visible world; either the *open* way or the *closed* way. The open style relies particularly on pictorial and novel traditions; the closed form on theatrical and novelistic origins, and both modalities involve different ways of seeing the world and different ways of experiencing and feeling it.<sup>56</sup> The following chart summarises the principal differences:

Open film	Closed film
the world of the film is a momentary frame around a reality in flux	the world of the film is autonomous, it is the only thing that exists
the frame is like a window, offering a privileged view to a world of which there exists multiple views	everything is determined by a larger design and has a formal function
there is a dynamic visual sense - the restless camera movement implies a world beyond the confines of the frame	static compositions - the limited camera movement implies a stasis in both style and content
characters and objects are self-sufficient	characters and objects are controlled by outside forces (i.e. the director)
the director discovers a space	the director creates a space
open directors include Ophüls and Rossellini	closed directors include Lang and Hitchcock

Although it must be said that these distinctions are equivocal rather than absolute

<sup>55</sup> Carné, in Chazal, p. 95.  
<sup>56</sup> Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films* (New York: Anchor Press and Doubleday, 1976), pp. 46-8.

(the opening shot of *Psycho* is testament to Hitchcock's innate understanding of the fluidity and openness of space), the spatial configurations of both Renoir (open) and Carné (closed) can fit neatly into this conceptualisation. The idea of open and closed film-making styles can be linked to Carné's and Renoir's working methods. The former had little faith in improvisation on set, whereas the latter's shooting script was never definitive and depended largely on flashes of inspiration *in situ*.<sup>57</sup> Closed films require clearly defined geometric and architectural homogeneity to fit into the schema, as well as a rigid dependency on a single directorial vision, whereas open films allow for a space to be found within which the story can take place and develop.

Open films allow for a fluid connection between people, objects and landscapes - they are constantly in flux and literally move in and out of focus to facilitate the ever-expanding narrative. Closed films, on the other hand, place objects and characters into a rigid matrix of spatial configurations. The claustrophobia of the narratives is mirrored in the fastidious arrangement of space that precludes any sense of movement or fluidity. For example, the opening and closing shots of *Hôtel du Nord* are far more than simple establishing or concluding shots. The shots imply a continuous loop; cyclical sequences that seem to underpin Carné's own conception of human life and understanding and establish him as a closed film-maker. His protagonists are rigidly framed, rarely moving out of the narrative and spatial configurations designated them by the director and designer. Carné implies that life goes on at random, and the lives of Pierre and Renée (Jean-Pierre Aumont and Annabella) are confined to the cinema frame. This element of narrative cyclicity

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<sup>57</sup> This duality between Carné's on-set authority and Renoir's much more *laissez-faire* style of film-making was noted by Bertrand Tavernier in a BBC documentary on Renoir. He claimed that there was a constant atmosphere of war on a Carné film as opposed to collaboration and discussion with a Renoir film. ('Jean Renoir' part 1, *Omnibus*, BBC1, 4 April 1995).

recurs in *Les Enfants du paradis*, which begins and ends with a carnival scene along the Boulevard du Crime. In both films, the liminal scenes are inscribed by the tracking and panning of Carné's camera through communal space.

An audience may lack the freedom of movement or viewpoint afforded the characters in either open or closed films, and the spectator is given access to a film's spatial configurations only from a predetermined set of positions, but through such camera techniques as deep focus or tracking shot (in an open film) or integration into a preternaturally symbolic world (in a closed one), the spectator can begin to influence their own perception of space and interpret the various architectural matrices.

If Renoir's cinema 'épouse le mouvement même de la vie' and Carné's poetic realism is 'manichéiste, statique, ostensiblement plastique'<sup>58</sup>, it is because Renoir's realism is significantly less tyrannical than Carné's; it is more *mouvant* because the decor does not force reality but rather complement it. Renoir is a classic open filmmaker, and even though one could argue that *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* is the paragon of closed film-making - the action unfolds in a tightly constructed environment and there are very few excursions outside of it - that film's airy, fluid and dynamic approach to *mise en scène* possesses all the attributes of open film-making. The scene when Lange shoots Batala (Jules Berry) is preceded by an elaborate and justly celebrated camera movement that follows Lange through the building and down the staircase. The sequence literally 'opens the space up' for the audience, visualises the full extent of the building's configurations and dimensions and underlines the crucial confluence between decor and psychology. The camera, located in the middle of the courtyard, frames Batala and Valentine (Odette Florelle)

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<sup>58</sup> Douchet and Nadeau, p. 130.

and then, in a single long-shot, cranes up the building to catch sight of Lange through a second-floor window, tracks left as he moves through the offices and then follows him down the staircase and out of the door.

It is the way in which the rigidly designed studio set becomes a crucible for dynamic film-making, where, unlike with Carné, everything is left to chance. If a tram noise can be heard on the soundtrack, drowning out some of the diegetic sound, or the on-screen 'extras' wave at the camera in *Boudu sauvé des eaux*, then this simply accentuates the reality effect. Far from anticipating the studio-based realism of 1930s French cinema, Renoir's artistic conception was to explore interior realism through exterior realism. In *Toni*, for example, the houses and the landscapes are shot *in situ*, as is the opening sequence of *La Bête humaine* and the conclusion of *La Grande illusion*. These scenes are so real as to invite comparisons with documentary reportage because Renoir's camera opens up a coherent space which reveals, little by little, the people and objects within the frame.

Carné's version of poetic realism is far too fabricated a film style to qualify as realism in the conventional sense, precisely because the audience is constantly aware of an element of preconception; of a meticulously planned hyper-reality. Whereas for Renoir, a rain-soaked street in *La Nuit du carrefour* is grubby and ugly; the same image in *Le Quai des brumes* is poetic and ethereal. In the former, the street is captured *tout court*; the latter manipulated, contorted, aestheticised, fully corroborating Jeancolas's observation that Carné's 'realism' was 'the orchestration of a myriad artifices [sic] controlled with exceptional talent by the director'.<sup>59</sup> Ultimately, the differences in style between Carné and Renoir and their cinematic approaches to an individual perception of the person/environment nexus is

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<sup>59</sup> Jeancolas, p. 79.

articulated by Carné's reliance on a tight angular constructed set and Renoir's proneness to fluid camera movements within a spacious, organic decor. For Carné the reciprocal symbolism between man and set justifies the inauthenticity of his *mise en scène*; for Renoir, space is a movable feast to frame his meditations on the interaction between communities and their urban and rural environments.

## Conclusion

This chapter has endeavoured to elicit how the emergence of studio-based set design and its relationship with location shooting differentiates people and place in poetic realist cinema.

Renoir's subtle use of *mise en scène*, deep-focus photography and fluid camera movement was combined with an alternation between location and studio shooting to integrate actors and objects into a clearly delineated spatial framework. This method of using the camera to record reality in a complex and fully dimensional way that is aesthetically preferable to the editing and shot/counter-shot artifices of other directors is contrasted to Carné. He represents the polar opposite of Renoir's filmmaking precisely because his films characterise all the artificiality of cinema that Renoir's open style seeks to efface. In a working practice similar to Kant's concept of reality, which proposed that all forms of plastic art attempt to create a perfect illusion, a world in which all aspects of reality are under the control of the creator, the Carné-Trauner reliance upon the studio proposed a depiction of reality in which all components of the *mise en scène* were meticulously planned to create the perfect illusion.



Although location work was still important for providing establishing shots and cut-aways, it seldom permitted the kinds of complex camera angles and lighting set-ups which were much easier to establish in a studio. As a 'lieu de travail, d'illusion, de reconstitution et de vie'<sup>60</sup>, the studio provided a consistency of atmosphere that ensured every detail could be constructed and lit to serve a specific purpose. If the key films of poetic realism communicate their individual meanings through significant contrasts, consciously drawing attention to their own dialectics, it is because our reading of set design is never fixed, forever temporary and subject to constant change and subject to a structuring duality. Whatever meanings are invoked by the spatial configuration will invariably be contrasted to another embedded within the configuration itself.

The coming of sound precipitated an oppositional creation of meaning: location shooting tended to be chosen in preference to the studio whenever a director needed an idyllic escape or the authenticity that such an escape required (*Une Partie de campagne*, the *guingette* scenes in *La Belle équipe*, the liminal scenes of *L'Atalante* and the Breton sea-shore in *Remorques*), whereas studio set work would be employed whenever a city or domestic space was to be configured. The following chapter will look more closely at how representations of the city and the countryside in 1930s poetic realism create oppositional meanings and how design can influence our reading of the narrative.

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<sup>60</sup> François Albera, *Albatros: des Russes à Paris 1919-1929* (Milan: Mazzotta and Cinémathèque Française, 1995), p.14.

## Chapter 5 - Configuring the city in poetic realism

O Paris, O ville infâme et merveilleuse

*Le père Jules* (Michel Simon) in *L'Atalante* (1934)

Quand on se promène au bord de l'eau  
Comme tout est beau  
Terre nouveau  
Paris est loin, comme une prison.

Jean (Jean Gabin) in *La Belle équipe* (1936)

For Raymond Williams, the urban/rural dichotomy is one that fundamentally organises human existence because the terms 'country' and 'city' stand for 'the experience of human communities'.<sup>1</sup> Williams's eco-criticism is a fundamental starting point in my discussion of the importance of the city in poetic realist cinema. Within the various oppositions which have shaped the development of cinema a whole range of spaces can be identified - wildernesses, pastoral landscapes, villages, rural towns, suburbs - but it is perhaps the presentation and exploration of the city that can best facilitate a reading of human interaction and communication in poetic realism.

In poetic realism, the presence of the city was ubiquitous - polemically, in Carné's frustrated question 'Quand le cinéma descendra-t-il dans la rue?', in which he urged French film-makers to capture the innate essence of the urban environment, architecturally, as a starkly contiguous spatial arena, forever linking and separating individuals and social groups and visually, in some of poetic realism's most atmospheric images. The 'night in the city' scenes in poetic realism, exemplified by Jean and Nelly (Jean Gabin and Michèle Morgan) embracing in the back alley of a fun-fair, Garance and Baptiste (Arletty and Jean-Louis Barrault) stealing away from

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and The City*, 2nd edn (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), p. 1.

the Barrière or Destin (Jean Vilar) stalking Georges (Pierre Brasseur) in the streets of northern Paris, provided the clearest visualisation of the key themes of poetic realism.

Once established within the artificiality of the studio, the city is frequently subject to its own dichotomisation - on the one hand it is a space of community; on the other a space of fracture and internal disassociation. Characters are tightly bound into the constructed urban environment and although they attempt active participation in the urban experience, they often become passive automatons, acted upon by the claustrophobic and murky setting.<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally, cultural configurations of the country and city have been orthodox and strictly delineated: the country was codified as 'good', virtuous, imbued with a sense of community and shared purpose; conversely, the city was 'evil', corrupting and above all a repository of individualism and a lack of community values. This Romantic attitude of privileging the countryside over the artificiality of the city is invoked repeatedly throughout early cinematic depictions of the two spaces, most typically in F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1924) and *City Girl* (1930).<sup>3</sup> Leaving the city for salvation in the countryside is also a recurrent pattern in American *film noir*: in *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), Sterling Hayden's idea of happiness is owning a farm, whilst Burt Lancaster and Robert Mitchum (in *The Killers* (1946) and *Out of the Past* (1947) respectively) have retired from lives of crime to the idyll of the country. John Baxter has argued that American culture above all others has prioritised the rural iconography, the 'shape and symbology of the land'<sup>4</sup>, and this observation is

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<sup>2</sup> Recall Edward G. Robinson in *Scarlet Street* (1945), a re-make of *La Chienne*: 'It's the city that's getting to us'.

<sup>3</sup> As well as a recurring theme in early German cinema, the negativity of the city was a common trope in early modernist poetry. The Belgian poet Verhaeren compared the modern city to an octopus sucking the life out from the country in his collection of poems *Les Villes Tentaculaires* (1895).

<sup>4</sup> John Baxter, *King Vidor* (New York: Monarch Press, 1976), p. 1.

also applicable to 1930s French cinema, where motifs of escape and the valorisation of the countryside pervade many of the key films.

Ginette Vincendeau has written that 1930s French cinema is predicated on two modes: 'light and dark'.<sup>5</sup> In 1930s poetic realism, this 'darkness' is exemplified by the city, where poetic realism is an urban phenomenon, concerned with and concentrated within a fraught city nexus. Its dialectic opposite, 'lightness', is found in the countryside, a place where poetic realist directors return constantly to underline the rural space as a locus of beauty, camaraderie and simplicity, using this as a counterpoint, often ironically, to the trials of the city. The final sequences of *A nous la liberté* become a paean to the simplicity of the open road and the 'liberté' of the title. With its bright skies and fleeting depiction of natural light, Clair's invocation of an impressionistic tableau is a marked contrast from the expressionist depiction of the factory where the shapes, textures and shades of Meerson's decor had accentuated the dehumanising aspects of industrialisation. A major motif in Carné's films is the desire (often thwarted or unfulfilled) to escape from the city and return to nature. In *Jenny*, the two lovers Dany and Lucien (Lisette Lanvin and Albert Préjean) wander along the Ourcq canal where they recall their youth on Belle-Ile (a scene that anticipates Jean Gabin and Mireille Balin's celebrated interchange in *Pépé le Moko*) but Carné frames them against an industrialised, claustrophobic setting (again anticipating a Gabin character, this time Jean with Nelly by the quayside in *Le Quai des brumes*). Carné adds poignancy to the scene by moving out of the artificiality of the studio and filming it on location. Similarly, notions of freedom and romantic fantasy in *Le Jour se lève* are encapsulated in François's desire to gather lilacs at Easter and Françoise's dream to go to stay on the Côte

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<sup>5</sup> Ginette Vincendeau, 'The beauty of the beast', *Sight and Sound*, 3 (1991), pp. 11-13 (p. 12).

d'Azur among mimosas. As Gabin is about to commit suicide, Jacqueline Laurent's voice can be heard faintly on the soundtrack ('à Pâques, on va chercher des lilas'), cruelly underlining the illusory transience of his dream.

Alongside Carné, both Renoir and Duvivier sought to valorise the country and propose a return to nature, regarding the urban space as a negative, closed-off presence. Yet unlike Carné, the return to the countryside is an achievable journey, and one which offers an improvement from the city. The opening sequence of Renoir's *Une Partie de campagne* (1936) makes this association explicit. The first three shots of the film are a confluence of the motifs held dear by Renoir that immediately transforms the narrative into a positive affirmation of the countryside. The first shot is a river - Renoir's establishing shot that recalls the pictorial *Lichtspiel* of his father<sup>6</sup>, the second shot is of a bridge, which functions as the transporting point from city into country; a literal and figurative link between two dialectically opposed lifestyles. Its recurrence recalls the bridge in *Boudu sauvé des eaux* which acted as a concrete spatial metaphor for that film's similar clash between dialectical opposites. The final shot heralds the arrival of *la famille* Dufour. Dufour (André Gabriello) informs his family that they have left Paris to 'se retrouver face à face à la nature'. His family's escape and the subsequent clash between city and country values become the crux of the narrative.

Both Carné and Renoir were arguably conscious of their pictorial heritage and of the debt owed to the Impressionist tradition of capturing working-class nostalgia and popular community through intricate framing and lighting effects. In his autobiography, Carné recalls how the Impressionist painters influenced him in his

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<sup>6</sup> For Renoir, the river is far more than just a picturesque stretch of water but instead a symbol of rural freedom. His fascination with rivers is a leitmotif in his work from *La Fille de l'eau* (1924) and *Une Partie de campagne* right through to his Hollywood debut *Swamp Water* (1941) and his post-war work *The River* (1951).

depiction of the Marne in his first feature, the documentary *Nogent, Eldorado du dimanche* (1929). He sought to capture the rural beauty and working-class camaraderie at Nogent-sur-Marne, arguing that 'l'atmosphère du film serait donc celle que Renoir et Monet ont immortalisée par leurs toiles'.<sup>7</sup> Carné's film certainly captures the *légèreté de touche* and *espèce de tendresse* towards his subject matter that echoed the leitmotifs of the Impressionist painters. The same is true of Renoir's *Une Partie de campagne* and the final sequences of *Boudu sauvé des eaux*, in which director son returns to the same visual themes as painter father - fetishisation of water, dappled light, the sensuality of the countryside. Looking back on his career in 1974, Renoir wrote how much of his early work was 'un étude du geste français à travers les tableaux de mon père et des peintres de sa génération'<sup>8</sup> precisely because he was looking back nostalgically to the places where his father created the same types of tableaux.

In addition to *Une Partie de campagne* and *Boudu sauvé des eaux*, Vigo's *L'Atalante* and Duvivier's *La Belle équipe* all offer positive connotations of wide, open rural space detached from the demoralising totality of the urban space. With their implications of escape and freedom, these films offer an ironic counterpoint to other films of the period, most notably Carné's Paris-set films and *Le Quai des brumes*, in which the claustrophobia of the city and the surrounding buildings is a symbol for the crushing pressure on the protagonist's psyche. Other than *Nogent, Eldorado du dimanche*, Carné's cinema rarely strays too far from the urban crucible in the 1930s. This probably says less about his subject matter (the countryside or notion of rural escape is rarely visualised in his films) and more about his association

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<sup>7</sup> Marcel Carné, *La Vie à belles dents* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1989), p. 356.

<sup>8</sup> In Roger Viry-Babel, *Jean Renoir: Le jeu et la règle* (Paris: Denoël, 1986), p. 87.

with and fascination for seeing poetic realism as a drably poetic urban phenomenon whose claustrophobic impact would be blunted should the narrative move away from the tightly constricting architecture of the city.

### Urban living in poetic realism

All those neat little houses and all those nice little streets. It's hard to believe that something is wrong in some of those little houses.

Carl Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman) in *All The President's Men* (1977)

In 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903), one of the most trenchant essays on the emotional life of city dwellers, German sociologist Georg Simmel attempts to describe and explain the effects of the social processes of urbanisation on modern individuals and examines the impact of urban living on the mental state of the inhabitants. Interested in the phenomenon of neurasthenia, or modern nervousness, which he located in the city, Simmel saw the urban environment as characterised by an 'intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted changes of outer and inner stimuli', noting the 'rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions'.<sup>9</sup> This picture of the city as sketched by Simmel in 1903 began to emerge with similar ambivalence in the cinema. According to Scott Bukatman, early cinema 'adroitly captured the city as a place of kaleidoscopic delirium and delight; a place of breakdown and rebirth'.<sup>10</sup> Critics extolled the street as a metaphor for the new urban experience which cinema

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<sup>9</sup> Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in *Simmel On Culture: Selected Writings*, ed. by David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 174-80 (p. 175).

<sup>10</sup> Scott Bukatman, *Blade Runner* (London: BFI, 1997), p. 12.

promised to capture. Walter Benjamin famously declared that cinema had ‘burst asunder’ our perception of metropolitan streets, allowing the spectator to ‘calmly and adventurously go travelling.’<sup>11</sup> For Kracauer, ‘the affinity of film for haphazard contingencies is most strikingly demonstrated by its unwavering susceptibility to the “street”’.<sup>12</sup> By conforming to this theory of the urban environment as a nexus of the physical and the imaginary, poetic realist directors frequently expose the city as an inexorable series of impressions. They exploit Simmel’s understanding of the contradictory aspect of the city life: a physical proximity to hundreds of other individuals yet a social distance from those same individuals. Indeed, the themes of distance and proximity and separation and connection central to Simmel are consolidated in poetic realism’s exploration of space. In *Le Jour se lève*, as Clara (Arletty) talks to François while they look out of her hotel window, she underlines the oxymoron of ‘close distance’ inherent in the city: ‘Mais moi j’ai habité ici et tu as habité en face. On était trop loin.’ There is a similar incident in *Quatorze juillet*, when Anna (Annabella) closes her shutters on Jean (Georges Rigaud) as he looks at her across the courtyard from his opposite window.

Moreover, for Simmel, a stranger is not someone who arrives in a community only to leave again, rather the stranger is someone who arrives in a community and stays in that community but remains on the edge or margins. If the inhabitants of an urban space cannot anchor themselves to their environment or adapt to the ambivalence inherent in that space, then they effectively become strangers, disengaged subjects whose geographical fixity becomes distorted. This stranger is ‘the personification of

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 4th edn, ed. by Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 665-81 (p.677).

<sup>12</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p.62.



all that modernity's efforts at cognitive spacing sought in vain to annihilate, and merely succeeded in displacing'.<sup>13</sup> The notion is exemplified in *Le Quai des brumes*, where Jean's marginalisation is explicitly rendered through spatial configurations - he is frequently filmed at the edge of the frame, looking in on the action, observing and reacting rather than participating and intervening. Jean's positionality within the Panama is also important, because instead of being the usual object of focalisation for spectator and character which predominates throughout Gabin's 1930s films, he is here denied the freedom of movement usually afforded him. In each of these incidents, there is a direct correlation between urban living and emotional distance. Even when community values are reinforced through festivities, there is a sense of fatalism imbued in the decor which undercuts the populism and optimism that the decor initially encapsulated.

Despite the attempt to abolish disorder through a rationalising concept of orthodox space, modernity instead succeeded in creating the paradoxical boundlessness and claustrophobia inherent in the urban crucible. What the city seeks is to cut across all boundaries of geography, ethnicity, class, and ideology. But this attempt at unity paradoxically initiates struggle and anguish, and far from being a privileged site of modernity, poetic realist films codify the city as a place of dehumanisation charged with angst. The urban setting initiates a direct, and often malign, influence on the fates of the characters, and the grimy urban decor becomes an explicit exteriorisation of individual states of mind. By mirroring their emotional states and assuming human characteristics, the city is perceived not as a locus of popular community but

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<sup>13</sup> David B. Clarke, 'Previewing the Cinematic City', in *The Cinematic City*, ed. David B. Clarke (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1-18 (p. 4).

as 'a kind of dream space, a delirious world of psychic projection rather than sociological delineation'.<sup>14</sup>

Even when poetic realist directors visualise the traditional iconographic spaces of a heterogeneous city through the introduction of orthodox spaces of interaction such as restaurants, cafés and courtyards, the sites of identification are frequently underpinned with motifs of absence or melancholy. By blurring geographical stability, poetic realism calls into question spectatorial position on the shifting sands of urban space. On the one hand, the city is a place of community and nostalgia, a homogeneous site of collective experience while on the other it is a place of anonymity, of fleeting impressions and destabilisation. Despite the unified spirit of the urban space, the various individuals never really coalesce into a collective experience. Behind the rational facade of geometrically unified space inherent in many poetic realist representations of the city, there remains a geographical fracture and a sense of things being pulled apart to reveal something completely different.

This fracture reveals the concept of disassociation and spatial uncertainty within a seemingly contiguous environment. The collapsing of imaginary spatial configurations is articulated in Tania's song in *Pépé le Moko*:

Où est-il mon moulin de la place Blanche  
Mon tabac, mon bistrot du coin  
Tous les jours, pour nous c'était dimanche  
Où sont-ils, nos amis, nos copains  
Où sont-ils tous nos bals musettes  
Leur java au son de l'accordéon  
Où sont-ils donc?

The ritualistic listing of the most common architectural and cultural motifs of working-class Paris reinforces the notion of the urban landscape as a dying space

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Delirious Projections', *Sight and Sound*, 2:4 (1992) pp. 24-7 (p. 25).

which can no longer be attained. As such, the song is a perfect *mise en abyme* of poetic realist concerns - the dark strain of fatalism which undercuts populist spatial configurations and the explicit identification with these configurations which in turn reflect the inner psyche of the character.

Confounding Penelope Houston's claim that 'cinema is about human relationships, not about spatial relationships'<sup>15</sup>, poetic realism instead seeks to explore the notion that spatial relationships may be regarded as metaphors for human relationships; that a stylised *mise en scène* and hyperbolic set design constitute an additional conceptualisation of narrative and character. Poetic realism explores the inherent bivalency of the city that is inextricably connected to the urban inhabitant and achieves a sort of anthropomorphism in which the spatial configuration and the human fuse and assume the same characteristics. Not only is the city a site of popular modernity (the heterogeneity of working-class spaces, the community of the *quartiers* and a place for mobility), but it is also a frequent zone of criminality and fracture where inhabitants of the local space are subject to competing emotional and social forces.

In their depictions of cities and urban landscapes, Carné, Chenal and Duvivier conform to Ford's assertion that cinematic cities are frequently represented as 'brooding, tension-filled places that actually participate in the character's descent into nightmarish predicaments'.<sup>16</sup> The monumental aspect of the decor isolates and imprisons the human figure. Recurring motifs of urban imprisonment are typical of poetic realist iconography where 'intimacy always implies enclosure and

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<sup>15</sup> In Raymond Durnat, *Films and Feelings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 70.

<sup>16</sup> Larry Ford, 'Sunshine and Shadows: Lighting and Color in the Depiction of Cities on Film', in *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle*, ed. by Stuart C. Aitken and Leo E. Zonn (Lanham, MD: Rowmann and Littlefield, 1994), pp. 119-36 (p.121).

constriction'<sup>17</sup>, a factor made immediately explicit in *Hôtel du Nord*, with its proliferation of iron beds, barred windows and the prison sequence or the image of Jean and Nelly framed behind the window and the ship-in-a-bottle in *Le Quai des brumes*. The discussion of the poetic realist set in Chapter 2 highlighted the representational instability that runs throughout 1930s poetic realism which links together German Expressionism, spatial haphazardness and an acutely stylised decor. These iconographic motifs (skewed camera angles, expressive set designs, chiaroscuro lighting) are uncomfortable aspects for the spectator more accustomed to an orthodox introduction to the fictional world.

Fritz Steele has argued that one of the most consistently important contributions of place has been 'to provide a sense of security to individuals and groups: a feeling that they are at home or have a home that they can go back to, which provides a sense of control over their whole fate'.<sup>18</sup> This is arguably true of much of poetic realist cinema, in which there is a perpetual struggle to reassert the values and rebuild the architecture of home by both individual and community. Few protagonists seem anchored to a specific space; instead they drift from place to place. Ginette Vincendeau identifies how French films are reluctant to portray the traditional nuclear family but are 'keen to "reconstruct" it in symbolic forms'.<sup>19</sup> The reconstruction will invariably take place in the café or the restaurant. 'Home' is connoted as a negative, almost non-existent space; and it is the communal space of the bar or hotel that usurps the privileged site of community interaction and interpersonal emotions. Characters are rarely seen eating, drinking or dancing 'chez

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<sup>17</sup> Edward Baron Turk, *Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 133.

<sup>18</sup> Fritz Steele, *The Sense of Place* (Boston: CBI Publishing, 1981), p.19.

<sup>19</sup> Ginette Vincendeau, 'From the *bal populaire* to the casino: class and leisure in French films of the 1930s' *Nottingham French Studies*, 31:2 (1992), pp. 52-70 (p. 56).

eux'; instead these basic social rituals will take place in village squares or restaurants. Exemplified in films such as *Quatorze juillet*, *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, *Hôtel du Nord*, and *Les Portes de la nuit*, these communal spaces create a popular community that typifies many of the cultural depictions of 1930s French working-class living. The Panama bar becomes 'home' for Jean in *Le Quai des brumes*. Described by Quart Vittel (Raymond Aimos) as 'quatre planches avec une porte dedans et un toit dessus', the bar is the privileged site of refuge and its description is fundamental in connoting a place of domesticity and simplicity. The bar functions as a microcosm and is clearly a refuge and solidarity network that recalls the recurring link between cafés and conviviality during the 1930s.<sup>20</sup>

When the spectator is afforded a depiction of the home, they are exceptions nonetheless charged with a negative perception of domesticity. In *Le Quai des brumes*, the wine cellar at the back of the trinket shop is a site of repressed emotion and erupting violence. Nelly finds Maurice's cuff-link under the stairs, which confirms her suspicion that he has been killed by Zabel (Michel Simon). Similarly at the end of the film, Jean kills Zabel in the cellar, having followed him down the stairs. Beneath the bourgeois uniformity of Zabel's domestic existence (the well-to-do shop, the ornate furniture and classical music in the dining-room) lies a site of primal violence.

In *Le Jour se lève*, claustrophobic living spaces are charged with a negative significance. Françoise lives on the metaphorical and literal periphery of society. Her domestic space is situated next to a railway line (which denotes a journey away

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<sup>20</sup> Although the links between Panama and Gabin's ideal *ailleurs* of Venezuela in *Le Quai des brumes* may simply imply that the bar is simply a staging post on his escape route, we could argue that this privileged site assumes extra importance, for 'Paname' is slang for Paris. Again we have an example of a 'Paris portative'; a transportable site deeply embedded in the subconscious of both film protagonist and spectator.

from community) and is dimly lit. The room is full of white linen hanging from the rafters which connotes an 'espace blanc', but the spectator is aware that this is a negatively-charged space. Postcards from Nice and Monte Carlo adorn her mirror, but these are *non-visible* places; heard of but not seen. We are not even sure if the sender of the cards, Valentin (Jules Berry) has been to these places given his reputation in the film; instead they function as configurations of an 'ailleurs'. Tight angles and constrictive spaces are embedded in the film's set design, while the ephemeral notion of escape is encapsulated by the postcards and the railway tracks leading to a vanishing point next to Françoise's house.

The notion of home and its symbolic reconstruction elsewhere is a strong theme in *La Maison du maltais* (1937). Matteo (Marcel Dalio) is symbiotically associated with his surroundings in the Sfax market place - he is forever touching the decor, putting his hands on walls, leaning against the sides of buildings, poking his head through windows, literally architecturalising himself into this space and underlining his personal affinity within it. Contrasted to this space is the L'Escale night club in Sfax, access to which is severely restricted for Matteo. The club is typically Westernised - shiny metallic surfaces, ornate decor, jazz music and tuxedos - and is a foreshadowing of the world Matteo enters when he arrives in Paris. When Matteo goes to Paris, the shared affinity with native decor is replaced by uncertainty and a sense of displacement. The Parisian decor is suffocating, with rooms cluttered with candelabra and chandeliers which seem to weigh down symbolically on the characters. Unable to position himself within the socio-spatial parameters of Western culture, the scene where Matteo returns from a Parisian bar in a drunken stupor metaphorises his disorientation within this explicitly *unheimlich* space. That Matteo's final vision before he dies is the 'maison du maltais' back in Sfax

reinforces the primacy of native space above the *faux*-glitter of Paris and valorises the notion of the home.

At the opening of *La Belle équipe*, Jean's personal living space is explicitly codified as undomesticated. He shouts that the concierge should 'balayer ma chambre, nettoyer les escaliers, frotter les murs et changer mes draps', concluding that the place is 'dégueulasse'. Later on, during the card game, the audience is presented for the first time with an image of his bedroom. Dominating the centre of the frame is a huge bay window overlooking the *quartier*. The window frame is a large lattice iron cross, which hints at a form of caged domesticity.

The negative connotations of the home are further underlined with the scenes in Gina's (Viviane Romance) apartment back in Paris. Her 'home' is codified as an animal's lair - the tight framing and skewed camera angles accentuate the claustrophobia of the space and the walls are adorned with semi-pornographic depictions of Gina. When Jean lashes out at her in the apartment, the camera pans across the room to the open window. The shot is of dual interest; on the one hand, the camera accentuates the roof of her apartment in the foreground of the shot, and the reason Jean has gone to Gina's is to ask for the money back that her husband gave her in order that the men may repair the roof of the *guinguette*. Similarly, the camera pan across the room seems to constitute a symbolic gesture to codify this particular home as *unheimlich*. By placing her room in the wider Parisian context (there is a shot of Sacré-Coeur in the background) and by impeding our gaze at the act of violence (Jean striking Gina), Duvivier seem to reinforce the negativity of this private city-space. By not showing the act, it implies that the city is a place of unseen violence.

## Private and public space in the city

This issue of integration and rejection within the domestic space can be related to the wider idea of public and private space in the city. In any film, there will always be a recurrence of sociopetal and sociofugal spaces; the former are areas where people are brought together, the latter where people are kept apart. To see how these public-private spaces are mapped enables an exploration of issues of class, gender and politics that may initially have been embedded in the narrative and could only be teased out through a close textual analysis of a film sequence. One of poetic realism's most distinctive attributes is the attempt to create an environment or a milieu which enables the protagonists to 'come alive' as their characters.<sup>21</sup> This may have wholly positive connotations, such as the courtyard communities in *Quatorze juillet* and *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, which, through the openness of their spatial co-ordinates, permit freedom of movement and transgression, or the milieu may have a crushing influence on the characters, denying movement or interaction, typified most notably in *Le Quai des brumes* and *Le Jour se lève*.

In the architectonics of poetic realism, there are always public and private spaces; accessible or closed off spaces, and they have direct influence on the behaviour of those protagonists confined to one or the other. For Renoir, 'chaque décor est un corps que celui des personnages cherche plus ou moins à se concilier; certains seront admis, d'autres rejetés'<sup>22</sup>, and it becomes clear that many of his films introduce characters who are either unsettled and uncomfortable in a certain environment or organically connected to the architectonics of the space. Public and private spaces

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<sup>21</sup> See 'Comment j'anime mes personnages', in Jean Renoir, *Ecrits 1926-1971* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1974), p. 223-5.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Douchet and Gilles Nadeau, *Paris Cinéma: Une ville vue par le cinéma de 1895 à nos jours* (Paris: Editions du Mars, 1987), p. 112.



may always stay rigidly dichotomised but they can be invested with negative or positive connotations. In *Quatorze juillet*, the dichotomy is used to comic effect during the *bal populaire*, in which the stuffy bourgeois couples celebrate in an enclosed, cramped restaurant, bereft of festivities and decoration. Despite the decorative opulence of the *dancing*, the lack of atmosphere is reflected in the *maître d'* yawning. By cross-cutting rhythmically to the local community celebrating in the square, full of colour and noise, Clair makes his social and political intentions never less than explicit. The *petites gens* of the *quartier* are clearly anchored to their space and display great affinity within it. They decorate the architecture with flowers and flags and move briskly across courtyards and through doors, unfettered by any social or spatial constraints. During the thunderstorm, the architecture is attuned to the growing romance of Anna and Jean, sheltering the couple as they kiss under a doorway. During the evening *bal populaire* in *Quatorze juillet*, the camera cranes upwards to provide a bird's-eye view of the entire community, reasserting and immortalising the social prominence of this residential landscape.

In Duvivier's imaginary Casbah, Pépé is denied the freedom of movement granted Slimane (Lucas Gridoux) and the Europeans, and when the boundaries are blurred, as in *Princesse Tam-Tam* (1935), the effects can be disorientating and highly revealing of class, racial and colonial perceptions of public space. Most explicit is the scene in which Tam-Tam (Josephine Baker) dances in an all-white bar while the Parisian *demi-monde* look on with a mixture of disgust and fascination. In *La Maison du maltais*, there is a variation on this scene in which Matteo is led down the stairs to the cellar by his friends who promise that they have found Saffia (Viviane Romance), the beautiful French prostitute Matteo has devoted himself to. They lead him to a tailor's dummy, dressed in elaborate clothes and jewellery. What is initially

a playful scene is charged with negative connotations - henceforth codified as a place of disappointment for Matteo, it is the cellar to which he will return at the end of the film, dress up in a white *gondoura* (a wool poncho) and kill himself. By conceiving a child with Saffia, Matteo has transgressed rigidly dichotomised social conventions and must die.

### **CASE STUDY: the city in poetic realism**

By the end of the 1930s, a significant part of French cinema had gone down the streets (admittedly by rebuilding those streets in the studio) and had proposed multiple readings of the city and urban living. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has argued that the most effective 'city films' are those in which the city acts as 'conditioning factor on the fiction precisely by its recalcitrance and its ability to be subordinated to the demands of the narrative'.<sup>23</sup> In this instance, the city becomes not just the arena in which fictional events take place, but a protagonist of the film. In the following overview of *L'Atalante*, *La Belle équipe*, *Pépé le Moko* and *Le Quai des brumes*, this notion of city-as-protagonist will be explored through the ways in which the city is depicted and privileged in architectural terms and how urban space is characterised by a sense of both inclusion and exclusion, wonder and danger.

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<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'Cities: Real and Imagined', in *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, ed. by Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (London: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 99-108 (p. 104).

## The Janus-faced city: *L'Atalante*

*L'Atalante* explicitly evokes both the enchanting and imposing quality of Paris. As Tom Conley suggests, the capital is the 'absent centre of the narrative'<sup>24</sup>; simultaneously there and not there, its presence continuously denied or hidden from view. When the barge finally arrives in Paris, Juliette (Dita Parlo) is desperate to see some excitement. During the journey to Paris, the audience has been primed to her desperation. We learn that newly married Juliette has never left the small village. When she hears 'Ici Paris' on the radio and the subsequent report on the latest fashions and shopping displays in the Boulevard Haussmann, her excited curiosity is rebuffed by her husband Jean (Jean Dasté). He is not interested in 'lamé', 'velours' or 'satin', or whether hats are now being worn perched beret-style. When the cabin-boy (Louis Lefèbvre) eventually shouts 'Paris', Juliette clambers onto the deck, still clad in her dressing gown, and gazes out into the distance. For the first time, Jaubert's music becomes deliberately self-conscious - a melodious mixture of piano, accordion and strings designed as an aural accompaniment to the promise of the city. Yet the city's arrival is not heralded by the Eiffel Tower or similar monument, but the grubby task of opening and closing canal locks. Throughout the first half, Paris merely functions as a 'code word for the world available outside the barge'<sup>25</sup> - its presence is invisible but inexorable, functioning as a site of desire and opportunity in contrast to the claustrophobic architecture of the barge. The barge demands intimacy and restriction, symbolising not just a way of life but also the very opposite of the kind of urban adventure Juliette is seeking. Indeed, the cramped spatial dimensions

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<sup>24</sup> Tom Conley, "Le Cinéaste de la vie moderne": Paris as Map in Film, 1924-34', in *Parisian Fields*, ed. by Michael Sheringham, (London: Reaktion, 1997), pp. 71-84 (p. 80).

<sup>25</sup> Marina Warner, *L'Atalante* (London: BFI, 1993), p. 30.

of the barge seem an extension of the claustrophobia of the small town at the start. She complains that when she looks out of her windows, all she can see is 'les rives' - Paris is persistently being configured as an evasive presence, an object of wonderment that is restricted from view. Vigo uses several high-angle shots to illustrate not only the closeness and intimacy of married life on the barge, but also a more negative reading of Juliette's new existence. The spatial configurations ensure social rituals such as eating, sleeping and washing become excessively communal and intrusive. Francis Jourdain's design scheme seems a deliberate attempt to offset the promise of Paris with a closed-off and airless existence.

When the barge finally docks in Paris, Juliette is still denied the pleasure of exploring the metropolis, as she and Jean must remain with the boat after *le père Jules* goes ashore. When they eventually enter, they visit a small *guinguette*, whose decorative streamers, paper lanterns and communal atmosphere represent Juliette's first (and therefore idealised) vision of the city. It is here that she meets a vaudevillian *camelot* (Gilles Margaritis) who performs magic for her and dances with her, which causes Jean to leave her behind in Paris in a fit of jealousy after she leaves the barge to go back to the city.

From this point on, Paris offers Juliette only ephemeral temptations and adorned corruption. Following roughly the same narrative trajectory as Murnau's *Sunrise* (an innocent from the country gets corrupted by the lure of the city), Paris becomes a hostile and, at best, indifferent place for Juliette. Vigo renders the space of the Paris day and the temporality of the streets. Whilst window-shopping, the initial architecture of Paris is welcoming: shop-windows are full of jewellery and fashionable clothes and the *tableau vivant* of smiling Parisians strolling down boulevards seems to reinforce her unrealistic perceptions of the city. Yet once her

purse is stolen and she is forced to look for work, the picture-postcard imagery of Paris becomes decidedly harsher. Once alone in the city, Juliette's (and the audience's) view of Paris is significantly altered - a crowd of people beat the pickpocket to the ground, unemployed workers queue outside a factory dominated by the sign 'Pas d'embauche', and austere industrial wildernesses constitute the backdrop of this new version of the metropolis. Yet as Keith Reader suggests, 'The city takes away, the city gives back.'<sup>26</sup> She is effectively rescued by *le père Jules*, who finds her working as a ticket attendant in a Pathé Chansons Palace. Juliette embraces the barge as a positive space, and the concluding aerial shot of the barge moving along the Seine highlights how it has become the privileged motif of security and domesticity. Dismissed by Juliette in the first half of the film as a restrictive space, the barge now becomes the dialectic opposite of the city, protective and comforting. The Paris of *L'Atalante* remains elusive and anti-touristic. Vigo had initially wanted to organise Juliette's discovery of Paris around a 360° panoramic view of Paris taken from the top of the Eiffel Tower. Although financial constraints prevented the shot, Conley argues that its omission allows the film to look 'skyward from an immanent perspective'.<sup>27</sup> By denying the central presence of the capital, the film codifies Paris as a *lieu de passage*, a place to be skirted through or around, rather than explicitly embraced.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Keith Reader, 'Cinematic representations of Paris: Vigo/Truffaut/Carax', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 4 (1993), pp. 409-15 (p. 412).

<sup>27</sup> Conley, p. 78.

<sup>28</sup> The presentation of Paris as a *lieu de passage* in *L'Atalante* is similar to Claude Autant-Lara's *La Traversée de Paris* (1956). Set in Occupation Paris in 1943, Martin (Bourvil) persuades a stranger, Grandgil (Jean Gabin) to help him transport four suitcases of pork from butcher to black market during a blackout. They are obliged to evade hungry dogs and air raids, while the darkened sets represent a deserted Paris which resounds to the sound of distant German patrols. A more recent New York equivalent was Walter Hill's *The Warriors* (1979), in which a New York gang must move from Riverside Drive Park in northern Bronx to Coney Island in south Brooklyn in the space of one night, negotiating contrasting urban spaces and eluding various rival street gangs.

## The transplanted city: *La Belle équipe*

As we have already demonstrated, a strong structuring dialectic in poetic realism is the representation of the city and the country as a hostile and welcoming space respectively. To highlight the tension between the urban and the rural space, two contrasting forms of social organisation defined by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies as *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* can be implemented. As Philip Kasinitz outlines:

*Gemeinschaft* is a type [of] social solidarity based on intimate bonds of sentiment, a common sense of place (social as well as physical), and a common sense of purpose. [They] are characterized by a high degree of face-to-face interaction in a common locality among people who have generally had common experiences [...] There is a high degree of social consensus and behaviour is governed by strong but usually informal institutions such as the family and peer group. In a *Gesellschaft* [...] relationships between people tend to be impersonal, superficial and calculating, and self-interest is the prevailing motive for human action.<sup>29</sup>

The theory reveals how early tribal (*Gemeinschaft*) societies achieved harmonious collaboration and co-operation due to the common culture and sense of common genetic and cultural identity in which all the members were raised. This avoided major conflicts concerning basic values since all the members shared a common set of mores and a common sense of destiny. As larger and more diverse societies began to develop, they began to be united by *Gesellschaft* ties. Instead of being united by a common set of values, the group was held together by a need to exchange goods or services, leading to an inevitable deterioration of family values or peer group ties. This *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* dialectic emerges in several 1930s poetic realist narratives, introducing a latent friction between an idealised version of urban community and its chaotic, 'disassociated' alternative.

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<sup>29</sup> Philip Kasinitz, 'Part 1: Modernity and the Urban Ethos: Introduction', in *Metropolis: Centre and Symbol of Our Times*, ed. by Phillip Kasinitz (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 7-20 (p. 11).

In *La Belle équipe*, the five friends are simultaneously ‘chez eux’ in their Parisian *quartier* and yet isolated within the urban milieu. The café and the apartment are the key loci of community where bonds of camaraderie are established through card games, drinking and singing. Yet it is on the outskirts of Paris, on the banks of the Marne, that the *guinguette* will be restored in the idyllic countryside. The rural environment is invoked in the film’s opening credits in a tracking shot along a country lane which consists of a low angle shot of trees and sunlight filtering through the leaves. It is in the country where, to quote Kasinitz, ‘intimate bonds of sentiment, a common sense of place and a common sense of purpose’ will be established. All three criteria are met in *La Belle équipe*. The ‘intimate bonds of sentiment’ are undoubtedly present at the outset of the film, and would never disintegrate even if they had stayed in Paris, but it becomes clear that their notions of masculinity and their camaraderie are reinforced and valorised once they begin restoring the *guinguette*. The shared sense of ‘place and purpose’ becomes self-evident once this initial bond of sentiment is harnessed and underlined. The five men all share the same bedroom, all share out various construction tasks, all agree on the methods of payment and credit share. The political implications of their purpose are rarely less than explicit: ‘Tout ça c’est pour les capitalistes’ declares Jean when he sees the riverside houses for the first time, but after he sees the dilapidated *guinguette* he underlines his desire to be integrated into that moneyed social caste: ‘On va la construire nous-mêmes’. Both the café in Paris and its rural equivalent are sites of camaraderie. A deceptively simple space, both the café and the *guinguette* reinforce the hidden tensions surrounding competing social or economic groups. Both spaces are characterised by proximity and co-presence and the creation of intense face-to-face interactions.

At the outset, Duvivier unequivocally equates 'the countryside', with all its generic and topographical motifs, as a positive space that reinforces social bonds and reinvigorates waning masculinity ('Ici, c'est une république où tous les citoyens sont président' warns Jean to Gina). In the city, the men may attempt to establish their notion of community through such typically masculinised forms of entertainment as drinking, card games and singing, but outside the *locus dramaticus* of the bar, they are denied these pleasures: the lights are switched off in the apartment during the card game and they fear the concierge will call the police. Early signifiers point to the discrepancy between the city as a site of inclusion and a site of rejection. Walking to the bar, Jean walks past a billboard displaying the slogan 'Pourquoi se morfondre [hang around] à Paris? - Stockez de la santé parmi les neiges éternelles'. This is a key statement, for once again the city has been codified as a place to move away from, to reconstitute elsewhere. This sense of urban displacement is reinforced in the next scene, where *faux*-impressionist paintings of idyllic rural landscapes adorn the café walls. A communal domestic space is to be reconstituted elsewhere - at the *guingette*, which, during the course of the film, assumes the symbolic role of 'home'. In its idyllic setting and its site of male camaraderie, the *guingette* becomes the men's domestic anchor (it is re-named 'Chez Nous'). During the storm which threatens to destroy the half-completed inn, Jean awakens and shouts 'on attaque le château'. He and the rest of the men then lie on the roof tiles to prevent them from blowing away. This is an interesting moment which shows the characters literally becoming part of the set, and by extension this rural space, through close physical identification with their immediate environment. Ultimately, it seems that the decision to purchase the *guingette* is an explicit attempt to reconfigure the *Gemeinschaft* on the outskirts of the city.



Conversely, the *Gesellschaft* model is characterised by impersonality and self-interest, as evidenced by the reaction of both the hotel landlord (Charles Granval) and Gina. After the friends have won the lottery, both immediately seek out the winners to try and lay claim on their winnings (the landlord tries to drink some champagne, while Gina comes to the *guingette* to ask for 2000 francs). These social structures can differentiate people and strengthen or undermine social and spatial boundaries and through the contrast between Paris and the *guingette*, various social castes have been communicated, reproduced and explored. If landscape in the general sense is the repository of social status and hierarchy and residential landscapes reaffirm the values of their members, then an ideal notion of community is strengthened in the *guingette* which leads to collective action based on disinterested values. The Hôtel du Roi d'Angleterre is the residential landscape at the opening of the film but as soon as this place has been codified as 'unliveable' by Jean, the next logical step is to re-establish this social system elsewhere, in the countryside.

Yet where Duvivier goes one step further in his sociological exploration of space is in an acknowledgement of the inherent ambivalence within the city/countryside nexus. Far from being two distinct sites of competing socio-cultural values, Duvivier's rendition of the urban-rural collision recalls Raymond Williams's arguing against an over-simplification of the cultural meaning embedded in orthodox notions of the two:

On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city had gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. *Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation.*<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Williams, p. 1. My emphasis.

This dismissal of the notion of the city-country nexus as an ideal monochromatic distinction (city: bad vs. country: good) is reflected in Duvivier's conception of locale. Paris is made a central space of male camaraderie in the bar and apartment room while the rural idyll soon breaks down after the arrival of both Gina in search of money and the *gendarme* with the warrant for Mario's arrest. What 'la belle équipe' searches for is an ideal community which privileges unity over difference and immediacy over arbitration, but they fail to comprehend that despite the utopian undertones inherent in small, face-to-face communities (architecturalised in the *guingette*), there will always be issues of alienation and anti-social behaviour inherent within even the most tightly-bonded community. Jean may tell Charles (Charles Vanel) that 'la citadelle est imprenable', but the film's initial urban tensions are merely displaced onto the rural site by the close, an opposition personified by Gina's disruptive influence and Jubette (Jacques Baumer) and his bourgeois cronies pontificating at the *guingette*'s opening. Even Charpin, the benign *gendarme* cannot be repelled forever, highlighting the ephemerality of an idealised rural community and the decisive influence of the *Gesellschaft*.<sup>31</sup>

### The unmappable city: *Pépé le Moko*

[A]près avoir vu la Casbah d'Alger dans *Pépé le Moko*, je regardais d'un autre oeil les rues et les escaliers de notre vieille ville [...] Le cinéma français était lourd d'odeurs, alors que le cinéma américain sentait le palmolive, le cosmétique et l'antiseptique.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Chenal's *Le Dernier tournant* (1939) also encapsulates this reversal of a traditional city/countryside dichotomy. The first adaptation of James M. Cain's 1934 novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the film was shot on location in the countryside, but incorporates many of the traditional visual motifs of poetic realism - chiaroscuro lighting, blinds casting shadows, claustrophobic domestic spaces. The barrenness of the landscape is a perfect counterpoint to the simmering sexual violence, while the remote positionality of the garage is crucial in establishing the loneliness of the characters and their isolation from social convention.

<sup>32</sup> Italo Calvino, 'Autobiographie d'un spectateur', *Positif*, 181 (May 1976), pp. 13-23 (p. 17).

*Pépé le Moko* (1937) is one of the few key poetic realist films that does not take place in France. When France, or more explicitly Paris, is referred to, it is invoked through a famously nostalgic exchange - in short, a verbal rather than visual conceptualisation of the city. Nonetheless, the set and the way in which it differentiates peoples and places is fundamental in creating narrative meaning and spatial significance in the film, especially as there are three 'city-spaces' operating at various points throughout the narrative.

The opening shot of the film is the map of a city, with its various districts highlighted: Algiers, the *quartier européen*, Bab el Oued, the Casbah. The camera then pulls back, offering an establishing shot of the police station in which the French authorities are discussing their inability to capture glamorous gangster Pépé le Moko. Important thematic strands are immediately apparent. The decor is resolutely European: it is recognisably familiar, with its geometric lay-out of space and tables, chairs, fans and filing cabinets all carefully balanced within the frame. The prominence of the mounted map on the wall is especially interesting as it attempts to offer a rationalist concept of native space. The French authorities assume that they have encompassed the randomness and haphazardness of the Casbah because it has literally been mapped and framed. But as *Moby Dick* tells us, true places never are in any map and the documentary-style montage that follows this opening sequence illustrates how apparently indexed space can be transcended through time and camera movement. Coupled with this spatio-temporal freedom is an acute sense of unease and *nervenleben*. The urban dweller is subjected to a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty because the city space cannot be fundamentally mapped, hence the unease of the Parisian police at the start of the film. Their inability to arrest Pépé essentially allegorises the unmappability of the native space

within which he flourishes. As Inspector Meunier (René Bergeron) concludes, 'il n'y a pas une casbah, il y en a cent'. This sprawling notion of space is further underlined by the failure of the ambush early on in the film - real entry to the Casbah is denied and for all the ethnographic allure such a place stimulates, the otherness of the place and its people is dangerous. The police authorities' self-conscious attempt at ordering the Casbah landscape seeks to efface its otherness and distil the space into a recognisably familiar pattern. That Algiers is a port city thus becomes a metaphor for the ephemerality of the various conceptualisations of the city in the film. Algiers is a liminary space, very much part of the nation but also a place of continuous movement. As such, the sprawling nature of the Casbah is indicative of the liminality of urban space and the inability to anchor oneself securely.

Burton Pike has suggested that when a writer looks at the city from above, 'he is placing himself (or his narrator) and the reader in an attitude of contemplation rather than involvement'.<sup>33</sup> A similar sense of omniscience is effected with the panoramic or high-angle shooting that is typical of a cinematic establishing shot.<sup>34</sup> The opening *vue plongeante* of the Casbah in *Pépé le Moko* fulfils the function of a master shot that momentarily draws attention to the spectacle being played out for the audience, and simultaneously encapsulates the urban space wherein the action will take place. The documentary-style montage which follows initially enacts this notion of contemplation rather than involvement, but the spectator is soon drawn into the space, involved in its mapping and understanding. As the camera moves in (through a slow zoom or tracking in), spectator positioning is shifted, and the recognition of

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<sup>33</sup> Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> The opening of *Eugénie Grandet* is typical of this technique, in which Balzac employs a zoomed establishing shot which moves steadily from the general to the specific. A cinematic equivalent of this technique is the first shot of *Psycho*.

city-as-spectacle transforms into city-as-receptacle. Not only does the city, and our perception of it, move from the general to the specific, but the camera movement encourages us to perceive the space in a different way; more actively and less passively precisely because the process of detachment becomes one of absorption. Poetic realist narratives function in the same way; opening up and then closing down the space in order to localise events or transform them into ones of greater significance.

In his chapter entitled 'Walking in the City', Michel de Certeau compares viewing New York from the observation deck of the World Trade Centre and experiencing the city walking on street level. The bird's-eye view, he suggests, offers a voyeuristic perspective. From high above, the city is an object to be held in its entirety, making 'the complexity of the city readable' and immobilising 'its opaque mobility in a transparent text'.<sup>35</sup> On the street, in contrast, the city is experienced in fragments, becoming a series of meaningful snapshots. The city thus becomes known through the series of fragments accumulated by the walker, and the seemingly insignificant parts coalesce into the whole.

However, alongside de Certeau's promise of a utopian urban discourse, David Forgacs distinguishes the contrast between the city as seen from above and below as corresponding to two different types of power, 'that of domination and that of resistance'.<sup>36</sup> The map of the Casbah in the police station promises a Benthamite desire for universal transparency, itself an extension of Maxime du Camp's claim that at the end of the nineteenth century (i.e. post-Haussmannisation), Paris had become 'enregistré, catalogué, numéroté, surveillé, éclairé, nettoyé, dirigé, soigné.

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<sup>35</sup> Michel de Certeau, 'Walking the City', in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 91-110 (p. 92).

<sup>36</sup> David Forgacs, *Rome Open City* (London: BFI, 2000), p. 36.

administré, arrêté, jugé, emprisonné, enterré'.<sup>37</sup> This is a clear indication of the promise of a utopian discourse that began with the Enlightenment ideal of rendering a city 'transparent'. This desire for a rationalisation of architectural haphazardness and the installation of 'un espace propre' in *Pépé le Moko* is explicitly emphasised in the opening scene. Ultimately, the mapping of urban native space in the film is the site for a confrontation between the readable, 'knowable' space and the obscure urban labyrinth. Despite the explicit attempts at domination epitomised by the map, resistance is offered at ground level. Pépé cannot be arrested, while the architectonics of the Casbah are characterised by hidden routes on foot, roof top escapes and a network of interlocking houses.

Indeed, Jacques Krauss's set design is crucial in differentiating people and space within the film. Characters are closely locked into their environment, and narrative space is rigidly dichotomised:

Le récit va et vient entre la ville européenne et le monde arabe. Le système d'énonciation oppose très fortement les deux séries: espace éclaté, temporalité brisée pour la casbah où la caméra, par des alternances multiples, fait passer de la maison de Grand'père aux ruelles, terrasses, chambres d'Inès [...] Espace et temporalité scénique pour la ville européenne qui se réduit aux seules pièces du commissariat et du restaurant.<sup>38</sup>

For the scenes in Algiers, there are very few documentary-style images or establishing shots of the action spaces. The police station and the restaurant are afforded only a small amount of screen time, and set designer Jacques Krauss employs several denotative elements to signify place. Contrasted to the 'European' space is the Casbah itself, which becomes the privileged spatial arena for the

<sup>37</sup> In Christopher Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Michèle Lagny, Marie-Claire Ropars and Pierre Sorlin, *Générique des années 30* (Vincennes: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1986), p. 161.

narrative and the audience. The definite shift in spatiality is achieved in the dissolve from the police station to the Casbah during Meunier's voice-over. There is a decisive move away from the spatio-temporal continuity between on-screen event and off-screen observer that characterises the opening exchanges in the police-station, and in contradistinction to this dominant masculine space, spatio-temporal orthodoxy is collapsed and replaced by an indeterminacy where both protagonist and the spectator are displaced by the fluidity of space-time mobility introduced by the documentary montage. Duvivier's mobile camera and abrupt changes of angle are crucial in creating a recognisable milieu which adds atmosphere and authenticity to the narrative. This atmosphere is then accentuated with the inclusion of vivid street names ('rue de la ville de Soum Soum', 'rue de l'hôtel du Miel'), diegetic indigenous music and picture-postcard iconography already familiar from the 1931 Exposition Coloniale.<sup>39</sup>

Barsacq observed that the Casbah decor had 'un pouvoir évocateur que les extérieurs tournés sur place ne possèdent pas' precisely because location shooting would 'disperse l'intérêt par son pittoresque volontaire'.<sup>40</sup> A fantastically intricate set could paradoxically have dissipated audience involvement in the narrative but Krauss's designs for the Casbah have the illusion of authenticity because he pays minimal attention to actual documentation. Unlike the working methods of Meerson and Trauner, Krauss used his impressions of the Casbah as a tool for reconstruction rather than a painstaking fidelity to existing documentation, and as Calvino's aforementioned comments on the evocative quality of this cinematic space suggests,

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<sup>39</sup> This mapping of the city is similar to sequences in *La Bataille d'Alger* (1965), which employs documentary footage to depict the city's dichotomised landscape. In *Algiers* (1938), a virtual shot-for-shot American remake of *Pépé le Moko*, director John Cromwell reused most of Duvivier's footage for the documentary sequence.

<sup>40</sup> Léon Barsacq, *Le Décor de film* (Paris: Seghers, 1970), p. 65.

the exotic set design becomes an index of the film's powerful spatial presence and stark materiality.

Motifs of entrapment proliferate in the montage voice-over at the start of the film: 'Des ruelles qui se croisent, se chevauchent, s'enlacent, se désenlacent dans un fouillis de labyrinthes. Les unes étroites, les autres voûtées comme des caves.' From the rectilinear dimensions of the police station to the inconsistent parameters of the Casbah, the spectator is taken on a sensory tour of the native space, with 'gouffres sombres et puants' and 'porches suintants'. The montage sequence is an interesting example of the way in which spatial positioning of women is used to connote them as certain types of women. Places themselves become gendered and sexed and the widespread association of women with the private rather than the public spaces of the Casbah is used to construct a binary distinction between decent women and less decent women. This duality is highlighted with Pépé's negative description of Inès as 'une espèce de Casbah portative', while rejoicing when he meets Gaby for the first time: 'j'ai un rendez-vous à Paris'. When Pépé begins singing, the spectator is sutured into the narrative along with the inhabitants of the Casbah, as both gaze up towards the terrace where he is performing. Not only does this scene visually connote the previous reference to the space as 'grouillant comme une fourmilière' in the opening montage, but it also highlights the architectural fusion of people and place.

Yet urban space is not necessarily architecturally constructed in the film. Verbal conceptualisations of space are also fundamental in establishing the spatial context. Gaby's travelling companions are caricatured as ignorant tourists: Mlle. Berthier finds the sun 'si triste', while Gravère (Jean Témerson) exclaims, 'J'adore le voyage parce que je m'imagine toujours être ailleurs - en Corse, j'avais l'impression d'être



en Turquie, et ici je suis en Chine.’ Through the eyes of the dominant French patriarch, native space is seen less as a geographical entity than as a travelogue checklist. They are resolutely anti-*flâneurs* because despite the freedom of mobility and vision granted them by their financial status, they choose not to explore the native space, preferring instead to remain within the inherently westernised confines of the hotel and bar. After his first visit to the Casbah, Maxime (Charles Granval) chooses not to return: ‘J’ai horreur de ça - je crève de chaleur, j’ai mal au cœur et j’ai envie de vomir.’ It is Gaby who wants to explore; she wishes to see Pépé and the environment he inhabits, and in this respect, she is re-enfranchised through her spatial wanderings in the Casbah. Instead of simply being the object of the look (as she is when Pépé sees her for the first time), she is the observer. The democratisation of space is complete - both the colon and the woman (both 1930s epitomes of ‘the Other’) are free to wander within the confines of the spatial nexus.

There are three ‘spaces’ in the film - the Casbah, the European *quartier* (the hotel, the restaurant and the police station) and an extradiegetic space, Paris. However, this latter is never *seen*; we are offered no flash-backs or voice-overs and instead the capital is constructed and configured verbally. ‘Il n’y a pas de Paris, pas de Marseille, rien, rien que la Casbah’ says Inès (Line Noro) to Pépé. The remark is an indication of how tightly he is anchored into his environment, and also how Paris is configured as a constant point of reference, continually refracted through the Casbah. David Henry Slavin has argued that Pépé’s contradictory identity is imprinted ‘on Paris, the city he claims, and Algiers, the city that claims him’.<sup>41</sup> Even before Pépé asks Gaby her name, he asks her to identify with his ‘space’: ‘Il vous plaît, mon

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<sup>41</sup> David Henry Slavin, *Colonial Cinema and Imperial France, 1919-1939: White Blind Spots, Male Fantasies, Settler Myths* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 179.

bled?’ His identity is constructed through geography, a point made even clearer in the famous scene in which P  p   and Gaby reminisce about their childhoods in Paris. They each in turn cite evocative landmarks and place names:

P  p  : C’est mon dernier bled, la rue Saint Martin.  
Gaby: Les Champs-  lys  es.  
P  p  : La gare du Nord.  
Gaby: L’Op  ra, le boulevard des Capucines.  
P  p  : Barb  s, La Chapelle.  
Gaby: La rue Montmartre.  
P  p  : Le boulevard Rochechouart.  
Gaby: La rue Fontaine.  
P  p   and Gaby: La place Blanche!

At La place Blanche, P  p   and Gaby have finally found a common space and a common identity. The cultural and topographical specificity is important because through it, Gaby has become the privileged site of P  p  ’s past. When he dances with Gaby, he tells her, ‘tu me fais penser au m  tro [...]    des cornets de frites et    des caf  s-cr  me    la terrasse’. This synaesthesia reconfirms P  p  ’s identity, and highlights the way in which non-*visible* spaces in the cinematic narrative are vital in creating a sense of place and nostalgia. The privileged urban spaces invoked in this sequence are charged with meaning through their successive association with a series of corresponding signifiers. These signifiers include the old *quartier*, childhood recollections and sensory stimuli, which all serve to consecrate Paris as a longed-for environment. In this respect *P  p   le Moko* can be consecrated as a key poetic realist film. P  p  ’s listing of working-class districts and Tania’s song ‘O   est-il donc?’ is congruent with the 1930s pan-artistic trend of depicting populist Paris through various visual and verbal means and this metonymic exchange reaffirms the basic mytho-iconography of poetic realism.

## The uninviting city: *Le Quai des brumes*

Generalising on *film noir* environments, Foster Hirsch has written how:

They create closed worlds from which a sense of the flow of life has been rigorously excluded. There seems to be no world outside the frame, and there are almost no other people on view beside the principals. These stories of obsession and self-destruction are enacted in a deliberately created vacuum – a sealed-off environment of airless rooms, and of threatening, lonely streets.<sup>42</sup>

If the structure and architectonics of *Le Quai des brumes* conform to Hirsch's typology, it also owes its iconography and mood to Joseph von Sternberg's *The Docks of New York* (1928). Designed by Hans Dreier and photographed by Harold Rossen, the film is a tale of doomed love among the working class set in seedy tenement rooms and dockside bars that are perpetually shrouded in fog and dramatically lit. In both films, the image of the cityscape is framed and immobile and an uncanniness is immediately accentuated due to the fact that the edge of the frame is *flou*, an effect employed to denote both an ephemerality and an unreality. In *Le Quai des brumes*, the absence of a 'world outside the frame' is exacerbated by the oppressiveness of the sky. Accentuated through the deliberate darkening of the top of the frame by Carné, Le Havre is explicitly codified as a sealed-off environment. Throughout the film, the edges of the frame are in perpetual haziness, denoting a dream-like landscape and the 'sale brouillard' which so afflicts Jean (Jean Gabin) in represents a powerful symbolic and literal blanket which underpins the narrative.

The entire *mise en scène*, from the chiaroscuro lighting to the murky decor, contains the visible traces of the protagonist's integration into the landscape. As

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<sup>42</sup> Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (New York: Barnes, 1981), p. 6.

Jean wanders through the streets of Le Havre, the lack of clarity in the images is suitably indicative of poetic realism's aesthetic concerns, representative of the Le Havre's pessimistic iconography and an objective correlative of the individual fates of the protagonists. The cumulative effect of the film's *grisaille* creates 'a murky diegetic universe with ill-defined and seemingly fluctuating borders'<sup>43</sup> which equates directly to the protagonists. In his book *Des Lumières et des ombres*, cinematographer Henri Alekan recalled how Schüfftan achieved the famous lighting effects in the film. Using a projector that could produce directed spotlights within a light flux allowed parts of the set to be lit without creating a double shadow. By seeking to 'briser l'uniformité ou la banalité des surfaces par la soudaine apparition dans le champ de regard d'éléments subversifs'<sup>44</sup>, Schüfftan was able to create lighting effects which systematically paralleled the architectural mood of the film. By complementing so symbiotically Trauner's set designs, the lighting was able to offer a second stylised correlation to the inner angst of the characters.

The negativity of the city is visually configured from the outset. Despite the bright headlamps that introduce the spectator to Gabin, he is entering into a site of physical and spiritual disillusionment. Light and illumination are important structuring metaphors in the debate about urban modernity - on a fundamental level, light leads to the depiction of a panoramic urban vision. Nothing can be hidden, opacity and ambivalence are collapsed in favour of a rational conceptualisation of space. This allegorical function of an illuminated city is clear, for a bright city is analogous with the notion of the enlightened city. This illumination within the cityscape collapses the boundaries between the public and the private, so that the

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<sup>43</sup> Janette Kay Bayles, 'Figuring the Object: Politics, Aesthetics and the Crisis of National Identity in Interwar French Literature and Cinema' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 1999), p. 365.

<sup>44</sup> Henri Alekan, *Des Lumières et des ombres* (Paris: Librairie du Collectionneur, 1991), p. 156.

space becomes communal. Beams of light cut through the innermost corners of apartments and streets, so that nothing can be hidden. Yet in *Le Quai des brumes*, the car headlights and the street lighting of Le Havre fail to penetrate the unremitting gloom, both literal and symbolic.

Moreover, the use of 'pictorial importing' alongside the studio shots lends an air of accentuated reality to the narrative. By using a documentary-style approach to the ships and docks of Le Havre, Trauner and Carné collapse the aesthetic distinction between the imaginary and the real, and the stylised decor facilitates the creation of a grimy urban landscape which explicitly resonates with the protagonists' inner feelings. Instead of constructing an indeterminable environment, Le Havre is transformed into a psychic space that transcends quotidian perceptions of the real. In *Le Quai des brumes*, Trauner suggests as much as he visualises, and the audience's understanding of the Panama bar as a liminal space removed from the rest of Le Havre correlates perfectly with the dominant narrative concerns. Sweep is tempered with detail and the wide-angle shots of the dockyards and the silhouettes of the cranes are perfect metaphors for the film's mood. This conscious attempt to foreground one characteristic aspect of the decor metonymically serves as a gateway to identification. The set is an attempt to awaken memories within the spectator's subconscious and to forge a second-level recreation that taps into a general understanding of a familiar space.

In *Le Quai des brumes*, the constructed places are spatially disparate. A comparison of Zabel's trinket shop, the Panama bar and the hotel reveals discontinuous spaces placed at various crucial points around the city; on the outskirts, by the docks, in the centre of town. Unlike *Hôtel du Nord*, in which the spatial contiguity is manifested through the hovering tracking shot across the bridge

and into the locus of community, the spatial configurations in *Le Quai des brumes* are characterised by a geographical disparity. This positionality is of prime importance in creating a sense of unease and other-worldliness. On the edge of the docks over looking the sea, the *baraque* is a site of ‘otherness’, of periphery. Inside, its iconography connotes stasis and entrapment such as the slatted windows, the blinds and the ship-in-the-bottle.

This divergence in Trauner’s spaces imposes a resolutely negative structure onto the key circumscribed spaces in the film. Despite the shelter the Panama bar offers, it is an artificial world which renounces the problems of everyday reality. Despite the connotations of refuge implicit in Le Havre (‘haven’), the city is codified as an unwelcoming and dangerous place. In this respect, Gabin typifies the human figure in the face of modernity, sitting uneasily in the world of the familiar. The spaces that he inhabits and through which he wanders seem no different from our conceptions of everyday urban reality, and yet the narrative is somehow charged with the uncanny from the outset. Jean symbolises the ‘homeless’; the perpetual *flâneur* in these unwelcoming places and his wanderings are charged with negativity. His encounter with Lucien (Pierre Brasseur) at the bumper-car ring transforms what is traditionally a site of enjoyment into primal space where machismo and violence simmer. Initially invested with positive connotations (a place of leisure, community, an arena for Jean and Nelly to display their affection), the bumper-car ring’s narrative valency is transformed by the arrival of Lucien. The incident is a primal scene at the centre of the film and pre-figures the film’s ending with Lucien shooting Jean from a real passing car. Carné’s skill is to transform the space’s meaning within a few key shots; its valency shifting from joyfully tempered melancholy (especially as the whole mid-section of the film is tinged with an unspoken sadness)

to a resolutely violent space that prefigures the film's closing sequence. Similarly, despite the bourgeois façade of Zabel's trinket shop, with its refined furniture, classical music and cosy domesticity, Jean will kill Zabel in the cellar at the back of the shop. Indeed, all three spaces seem a representative conflation of both the *heimlich* (homely, welcoming) and the *unheimlich* (uncanny, unwelcoming), for beneath the dissimulation of these orthodox welcoming spaces lie elements of negativity. Even the traditional romantic iconography of the film is played out in constricted, claustrophobic spaces to such an extent that the set design becomes an objective correlative of the characters' fate. When Jean meets Nelly for the first time, they look out to sea through a barred window. Likewise, the fun-fair should be a site of community and collective happiness, but the scene is underscored by an incessant sadness. Jean and Nelly are photographed together in front of a *trompe l'oeil* backdrop of a ship heading out to sea. It is a scene charged with potential romanticism yet undermined by the artificial connotations of the *mise en scène*. Similarly, when Nelly declares her love for Jean, the lighting is bleak and restrained and the music mournful. In the background, there is the sound of toy guns being fired, which bathetically undermines the poignancy of the scene and foreshadows Jean's eventual demise.

*Le Quai des brumes* arguably conforms most readily to a definition of poetic realism as narrativised set design, and shows how architecture and set design can encapsulate and stimulate atmosphere and emotional response. In his autobiography, Carné recognised that the film he was shooting was revolutionary in both mood and content. Recalling how the visual texture of the films of his youth were 'brillantes, ensoleillées et grouillantes de figurations', he sought instead to reverse this artistic trend 'avec ma boîte de nuit vide, ma brume, ma grisaille, mon pavé mouillé et mon

réverbère'.<sup>45</sup> Less is more in *Le Quai des brumes*. The aesthetic economy of Trauner's decor allows the spectator to appreciate the charged value of the set and consequently conforms to a definition of set design as the compression of narrative into a confined space. Ultimately, Carné's Le Havre landscape has been dramatically foregrounded through the position of the camera and the active interaction of light and shadow. It is the way in which Carné and Trauner have appropriated the *real* Le Havre (the shots of the harbour and dock sky-line as Nelly and Jean stroll through the early morning deserted streets) and imported it into their own narrative that lends the film its poetic realist quality. However brief this pictorial importing may seem, these shots are crucial in underscoring the realism of the film, and it is through the confluence of *built* and *real* that this hyper-reality emerges. If 'le décor est un personnage discret, mais constamment présent, le complice le plus dévoué du réalisateur',<sup>46</sup> then both Carné and Trauner have recognised the power of the juxtaposition of real and artificial, and through poetic assimilation have enriched the urban atmosphere. The decor does inevitably become complicit in the director's fantasy and in *Le Quai des brumes*, it is the organic backdrop on which all action takes place. Finally, Keith Reader is right to suggest that 'the "poetic" quality of Trauner's décor is perhaps more apparent today than its realism'<sup>47</sup> precisely because any resemblance that the Le Havre of *Le Quai des brumes* may have exerted on the spectator is now totally different, given that the town was virtually destroyed during World War Two. In this respect, the city is a dream-space, underpinned by atmosphere and expression rather than any conventional sociological depiction.

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<sup>45</sup> Carné, p. 75.

<sup>46</sup> Barsacq, p. 101.

<sup>47</sup> Keith A. Reader, 'Subtext: Paris of Alexandre Trauner', in *Spaces in European Cinema*, ed. by Myrto Konstantarakos (Exeter and Portland, OR: Intellect, 2000), pp. 35-41 (p. 36).



## Conclusion

It is the visual environment of the film which carries the weight of the narrative, and in poetic realism, it is the city which is frequently the privileged site for an interaction between decor and psychology. Apart from during the Occupation, French cinema has always been 'predominantly Parisian'<sup>48</sup> and this is undoubtedly true of 1930s poetic realism, in which the capital is the backdrop for many of the key films.

The city not only operates as a film set, but it also 'plays itself', by preserving its own spatial integrity and intricate architectural properties. It is rarely impersonal or indifferent, but instead, the urban landscape plays strongly on its intrinsic visual configurations. Although in the aforementioned examples, Paris is not as aggressively configured as in *Hôtel du Nord*, *Les Enfants du paradis* or *Les Portes de la nuit*, its visual and geographic influence is felt constantly. Either as a site of desire (*L'Atalante*), an idealised rural alternative (*La Belle équipe*) or a lost maternal object (*Pépé le Moko*), Paris exerts a powerful control on the individual. Even in *Le Havre*, its presence is felt in the name of the 'Panama' bar.

Paris has something that, say, London does not, namely a cinematic atmosphere, or 'imageability'. Defined by Kevin Lynch as 'that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer'<sup>49</sup>,

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<sup>48</sup> Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 163.

<sup>49</sup> Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), p. 9. The *Forum des Images* in Paris has accumulated over 10,000 films that have been set in Paris, and the database contains a subsection on decor. The viewer is presented with a list of all the cinematic depictions of familiar Parisian spaces: 'espaces verts', 'monuments', 'canaux et bassins', 'quartier', 'musée', 'places', 'gares', 'la Seine' and 'banlieue'. This is not to say that London does not possess similar cinematic backdrops, but what the *Forum des Images* explicitly recognises is that the Parisian landscape is inherently cinematic due to the continued consecration of the aforementioned spaces in French cultural and artistic depictions.

the term imageability evokes the overall legibility of urban space, the ability cities have to generate stark visual impressions in the minds of the inhabitants and thus supplying them with strong images of their environments. In his classic work, Lynch considers the city not just as a thing itself - an agglomeration of buildings - but the city as its inhabitants perceive it. He argues that a city dweller's perception of a city revolves around five basic urban elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. In poetic realist cinema, these properties are easy to identify: the path is the road or street which bisects and connects; the edge is the wall, tangible or symbolic, which defines the arena of the communal space; the district is the *quartier* or micro-community; the node is that strategic point of contact to which the individual is drawn (in the case of poetic realism, the café); and the landmark is that construction which dominates the surroundings (a building, train station or fun-fair). All of these properties possess an identity, a structure and a meaning; all retain and emit significance to the spectator, whether pragmatic or emotional. These recurrent foundational elements upon which depends a person's ability to orient themselves and develop a strong sense of place form the basis of the next chapter, in which I shall examine the role of 'action spaces' in 1930s poetic realism. I shall highlight how individual places and decor fragments - staircases, doors, windows, courtyards, and bridges - can be employed by directors and set designers as key signifiers for character and narrative development. Moreover, I will demonstrate that the more 'imageable' the set designer can make the action space, the more our grasp of the surrounding world will 'not merely be simplified, but also extended and deepened'.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Lynch, p. 10.

## Chapter 6 - 'Action spaces' and architectural specificity in poetic realist cinema

In all noble architecture, the details are so finely balanced and harmonized as to fit in with the whole. No detail, however small, can be changed without giving the impression of a flow in the harmony [...] Something similar applies to film. Only when all the artistic elements of a film have been welded together so firmly [...] without damaging the whole, only then can the film be compared to a piece of architectural art. Films which do not satisfy this demand are like those conventional uninspired houses that one passes by without even noticing.<sup>1</sup>

It is axiomatic that film architecture is an architecture imbued with meaning; there is nothing in the frame that does not 'mean' anything. Decor is never a shell, standing detached from the action, but instead possesses a powerful dramaturgical and symbolic charge. The overall design of a film - how it organises and presents the various settings of its fictional world - is fundamental in aligning the spectator's perspective. Nothing is ever superfluous and the figural dimensions of everyday decor fragments are constantly explored to such an extent that a window or door may anthropomorphise into a powerful visual and emotional signifier.

Equally important is the extent to which a film's visual ambience enhances its emotional dimensions. In Hitchcock's films, milieu and architecture always have the same role - they function as psychic amplifiers of the story. The films generally unfold in an idyllic and relaxed atmosphere and the buildings often reflect an amusing, ironic look at bourgeois life. However, as the story develops, the sense of narrative foreboding is transferred onto the buildings, such as the apartment block in *Rear Window* or Bodega Bay in *The Birds*.

Likewise, this function of architecture as a resonator of mental impact is constantly explored in poetic realism. Not only are the key films all strongly

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Dreyer, 'Thoughts on my craft', *Media for Our Time: An Anthology*, ed. by Dennis deNitto (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 154.

anchored to a recognisable landscape but they also rely heavily on atmospheric milieux, spatial specifics and the familiarity of everyday places to explore deeper levels of meaning embedded in the narrative. In effect, 1930s films emotionalise architecture, whereby the set designs and spatial configurations ‘amount to a perfect transformation of material objects into emotional ornaments’.<sup>2</sup> It is this symbiosis that shall be explored in this chapter, with the overall argument being that poetic realist decor is never a silent shell but instead a token and a reflection of the internal emotions of the characters. 1930s set designers sought to distil a visual concept from the thematic and psychological concerns of the screenplay, and this interface between story and style finds its best expression in ‘action spaces’. Faced with the choice of whether the decor should determine the visual style of the film, provide a counterpart to the narrative, or create a passive environment integrated into the action, the 1930s set designers frequently fused the various properties of architecture (function, beauty, structure) into an organic set that became a character in its own right.

In this chapter, I will examine spatial specificity, paying close attention to the ways in which decor fragments such as a door, window or staircase shift from mere functionalism to become a crucial narrative element. Hans Dieter Schaal, whose astute deconstruction of Hollywood sets and spaces has come to inform much of my understanding of the way decor and the fusion of film and architecture can make a day-dream space tangible, has argued that film architecture works ‘in statements and images, with built psychology, spiritual spaces, spiritual landscapes’.<sup>3</sup> What poetic

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<sup>2</sup> Neil Reynolds, ‘The Architecture of Silents: An Investigation of German Film Design 1919-1926’ (unpublished masters’s thesis, University of Nottingham, 1993), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Dieter Schaal, *Learning from Hollywood: Architecture and Film* (Stuttgart and London: Axel Menges, 1996), p. 16.

realist film-makers achieved was a releasing of the symbolic inherent in the everyday and the subsequent effecting of poetic correspondences and resonances.

Both the film-maker and the set designer recognised that spatial haphazardness and pictorial distortion carry powerful emotional and metaphysical charges and the use of unexpected angles or over-prominence of certain decor fragments will affect the spectator's perception of a film far greater than an orthodox *mise en scène* or bland, circumspect compositions. In 1931, Lucie Derain observed that black-box backdrops had to give way to the increasing centrality of film decor and that to produce 'une oeuvre de valeur' necessitated a strong, stylised set design. Lamenting the current state of the art, she concluded:

Un beau décor ne doit pas accaparer [preoccupy] tout l'intérêt du spectateur. Mais il ne doit pas non plus le choquer ni lui imposer son exigüité et sa banale insuffisance. Certes, il est vain de tout asservir au cadre. Mais enfermer une belle histoire dans des décors indigents ou mal composés, n'est-ce pas le fait de la bêtise et de l'incompréhension de certains producteurs du cinéma français?<sup>4</sup>

Derain's comments are corroborated by Raymond Borde, whose study of picture stills from several hundred 1930s films led him to conclude that the majority of French cinematic decor of this period was of 'une banalité intemporelle'; that the style of Henri II rather than Mallet-Stevens was more in vogue. This was not an explicit disparagement of Henri II furniture and visual style *per se*, but rather an implicit recognition that French cinematic design had failed to perpetuate the adoption of modern architecture for film sets first established in the mid-1920s with the Mallet-Stevens-designed *L'Inhumaine* (1924). Only Lazare Meerson had genuinely attempted to extend the legacy of modernist designers into the 1930s

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<sup>4</sup> Lucie Derain, 'Décors et Décorateurs dans le cinéma français', *La Revue de Cinéma*, 27 (1 October 1931), pp. 26-31 (p. 31).

through his interplay with glass, iron and geometric formalism, as the majority of set designers were content with replicating theatrical-style decor that relied upon the assimilation of stock visual elements and unadventurous design schemes. Only occasionally, argued Borde, would the presence of ‘une grille, une porte ou la ligne d’un meuble’ remind 1930s audiences and critics that decorative originality and stylisation could still punctuate a tentative design scheme.<sup>5</sup>

Both Derain and Borde imply the existence in certain 1930s films of an expressive decor - those sets which reflect a particular character’s emotional state or a fundamental narrative concern - and as such recognise the link back to German Expressionism as the template for the fusion between spatial specificity and individual emotion. The artistic imperatives of Expressionism which are clearly imprinted on the films of this period have already been explored in Chapter 2, but while the totality of the set and the fastidious arrangement of space in poetic realism bears strong comparison with German Expressionism, poetic realist cinema places a far greater emphasis on the ‘little things’; peripheral details like the number of steps on a staircase, the play of light and shade on city streets, spatial leitmotifs which recur throughout the narrative or the proliferation of ‘accessoires’ that in a film like *Un Carnet de bal* comes to symbolise thematic concerns. Poetic correspondences are established through the foregrounding of decor fragments and the exaggeration of individual details. Close textual analysis of several canonical films (*Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, *Un Carnet de bal*, *Hôtel du Nord* and *Le Jour se lève*) will emphasise the way in which the exterior qualities of built environments might express inner atmosphere, character and mood.

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond Borde, ‘La France des années 30’, *L’Avant-scène du cinéma*, 173 (1976), pp. 23-45 (p. 31).

## Functionalism vs. *Stimmung*

If the designer merely imitated photography to construct his sets, the film would remain faceless and impersonal. There has to be the possibility of bringing out an object's essential attributes so as to give the image style and colour [...] He must penetrate the surface of things and reach their heart. He must create mood (*Stimmung*).<sup>6</sup>

One method of codifying the importance of narrative spaces is through this dichotomy of functionalism and *Stimmung*. The issue raises one of the core problematics of decor. Is film architecture supposed to simply 'be there'; designed to exist solely as a container of action (functionalism)? Or should it emotionalise mood, anthropomorphically mirroring the emotions of the characters and embodying the atmosphere of the narrative (*Stimmung*)?<sup>7</sup>

This intersection between functionalism and stylisation was first articulated by the Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollo. In *De architectura*, written around 25 BC, he outlined the three necessary qualities of architecture as:

*firmitas* (soundness)

*utilitas* (utility)

*venustas* (attractiveness)

*Firmitas* is the need for architecture to maintain its structural integrity and constructional soundness, *utilitas* addresses the purpose of the building which results from functional planning and the logical arrangement of spaces according to their

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Leni in Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. by Roger Greaves (London : Thames and Hudson, 1969), p. 127.

<sup>7</sup> Modern architecture is concerned above all with the functional, epitomised by Le Corbusier's 'machine à habiter' and Viollet-le-Duc's earlier claim that the first law of art was to conform to the needs and customs of the times.

intention and *venustas* refers to the aesthetic qualities of the structure. Because buildings are usually exclusively thought about in terms of usage and function, *firmitas* and *utilitas* address the utilitarian, tangible aspects of the building. *Venustas* is the elusive quality of architecture where the harmony of the parts, the design concept expressed in the building and the ornamentation give a structure beauty when integrated with the qualities of structure and function.<sup>8</sup> All architecture can be said to be a balance between these three elements, with none overpowering the other. Thus only when architecture has been created within the structure-function-beauty matrix can the complex relationship between the physical fabric of the built environment and the shapes and patterns of human life operating within it be revealed.

Vitruvius's trichotomy is equally applicable to cinematic architecture - decorative stylisations should not outweigh the set's fundamental role as a container of action; instead, there should be a productive and enduring harmonisation of the three. If an expressive *mise en scène* is predominantly arranged in the interests of clinching narrative significance, it is likewise developed as something alluring in itself and secured as a source of visual pleasure. Only when the structure and function have been established should a third, albeit optional, factor enter the diegesis - that the space become visually pleasurable (*venustas*), functioning as spectacle as well as receptacle.

Film architecture should not necessarily remain faceless and impersonal for there will always be a certain compliance between art director and the final aesthetic

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<sup>8</sup> See 'First Principles and the Layout of Cities', in Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, trans. by Morris Hicky Morgan (New York: Dover, 1960), pp. 13-16. His ten-volume work on Greek and Roman classical architecture lay largely forgotten until the early 1400s, but following its discovery in the monastic library of St-Gallen in Switzerland, the work became highly influential in the Renaissance.



demands of the narrative. If 1930s poetic realism depended upon a highly narrativised set design, then it is axiomatic to equate the synthetic environment as a mirror for the mood of the film. Poetic realism relies on the ability of both designer and audience to penetrate the surface of things; to punctuate the functional with an element of poetry. Rudolf Arnheim cogently argued that a building must not just be 'a useful object', but 'an object whose function translated into corresponding patterns of visible behaviour will enhance the spirit of our existence'.<sup>9</sup> Thus the decor in a poetic realist film must perform a dual role: it should construct a narrative space wherein the plot unfolds and the protagonists perform, and it should also convince the audience that far from being a neutral, unmediated space, what is depicted on the screen can be openly interpreted as a real authenticating *topos* that reinforces and underpins the narrative. There persists in poetic realism a constant tension between the necessity to create powerful and symbolically loaded narrative spaces on the one hand, and an artistic equilibrium that needs to be maintained on the other. The designer is charged with teasing out the *Stimmung* whilst at the same time remaining faithful to the functional role that the structure should possess. As we examined in chapter 3, both technical and aesthetic skills are required by the architect to create architecture, and the same is true of set design.

Eugène Lourié sought to keep his sets clear and free from extraneous detail. He also attempted to keep the walls of a room as bare as possible, arguing that uncluttered, light-coloured sets formed 'perfect backgrounds for silhouetted movements of actors, making them extremely readable'.<sup>10</sup> Carné has spoken of his debt to Murnau, recalling how the German director's rigidly designed and co-

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<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 64.

<sup>10</sup> Eugène Lourié, *My Work in Films* (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), p. 67.

ordinated sets, although enveloped in transcendental meaning, could nonetheless maintain an impression of objective reality,<sup>11</sup> and the subsequent Carné-Trauner collaborations are characterised by this juxtaposition of the real and the symbolic within the design process. When Bazin concluded that in Carné's cinema 'la symbolique n'y précède jamais le réalisme' but instead 'l'accomplit comme par surcroît'<sup>12</sup>, he recognised how the symbolic undertones of Carné's narrative spaces never overshadowed their mimetic capacity, but instead relied on a subtle balance of functionalism and stylisation.

### **Action spaces**

The starting point to the discussion on the importance of individual design fragments in 1930s French cinema crystallises around a concept I term 'action spaces'. These are spaces which embody sites of conflict, both narrative and emotional, and become an important structuring metaphor in the differentiation of people and places in the cinema. Most importantly, the 'action space' assumes a stark narrative privilege. Architectural imagery and the articulation of space create the basic dramatic and choreographic rhythm of any film, and those directors who identify the most potent encounters of architecture will invest them with a powerful transformative power. These 'action spaces' originate from an adherence to the Vitruvian code of structure and function, and once established, shift from simple built space to exert a totalising

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<sup>11</sup> Hélène Climent-Oms, 'Carné parle', *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque*, 5 (Winter 1972), pp. 31-49 (p. 35).

<sup>12</sup> André Bazin, *Le Cinéma français de la Libération à la Nouvelle Vague 1945-1958* (Paris: Petite Bibliothèque des Cahiers du Cinéma, 1998), p. 92.

effect on the narrative. The very meaning of the film consequently lies embedded in the space in which the action takes place.<sup>13</sup>

Admittedly, this notion is not necessarily a new one. Dickens relied constantly on the mood and atmosphere of a claustrophobic London landscape, and nineteenth-century French novelists regarded architecture not as a 'simple bâti et ponctuation d'un espace, simple "décor" devant lequel mettre en scène une intrigue,'<sup>14</sup> but as a structure that could be imbued with meaning through verbal impressionism. Both novelist and set designer build up a mosaic of sense impressions which complement the action and provide oblique comment on the wider concerns of the narrative. Hans Poelzig once noted how it was possible to express in the facade of a structure 'all the dynamic, ecstatic, fantastic and pathetic elements which constitute the psychic nature of the life within that structure'<sup>15</sup> - in short, architecture could exert a strong influence on the spectator and express a deeper, more nuanced reading of the narrative. Both Carné and Renoir might be described as 'impressionist' and 'expressionist' as both distorted reality into hallucinatory architectural shapes to objectify inner experience. T.S. Eliot termed this objectification the 'objective correlative', or:

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Baron Turk, for instance, has made the convincing claim that the bumper-car ring in *Le Quai des brumes* is a metaphoric rendering of France's chaotic politics in the 1930s (*Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 116). Other examples of metaphoric sites might include the boarding school in Vigo's *Zéro de conduite* (1930) as analogous to authoritarian France or the courtyard community of *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* as an expression of Front Populaire optimism.

<sup>14</sup> Philippe Hamon, *Expositions: Littérature et Architecture au XIXe siècle* (Paris: José Corti, 1989) p.10. For example, Balzac's *La Fausse maîtresse* declares: 'L'architecture est l'expression des mœurs'. (Honoré de Balzac, 'La Fausse maîtresse', in *La Comédie Humaine, II: Etude de mœurs, Scènes de la vie privée*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 195-243 (p. 200)).

<sup>15</sup> In Reynolds, p. 44. Poelzig was best known for designing *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (1920).

A set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.<sup>16</sup>

For instance, a dark city street in a horror film becomes an objective correlative for fear, or in 1930s poetic realist cinema, haphazard and oblique architectural configurations or foregrounded design fragments allow an emotion to be ‘immediately evoked’.

In poetic realist films, these action spaces range from the general to the specific; on the one hand a courtyard or city street can constitute an action space; on the other, the director may seek to use a site-specific action space (staircase, window, bridge) in which to intensify the narrative and aesthetic effect. What can be ascertained is that the ‘action space’ concept tends to crystallise around enclosed pockets of community rather than recognisable city symbols. Carné’s and Renoir’s Paris is neither touristic nor monumental - there are very few shots, for instance, of the Eiffel Tower or Arc de Triomphe in their films - because both directors concentrate more intensely on the constituent action spaces that stand for symbols for the city as a whole and explore the ‘person-environment’ nexus within smaller spatial configurations. When the spectator is granted privileged shots of Parisian landmarks, they are generally brief pictorial imports or *découvertes* to set the scene before a dissolve into a smaller ‘action space’. In *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, when Charles (Maurice Baquet) cycles back to the courtyard to deliver copies of ‘Arizona Jim’, there is the image of the Arc de Triomphe in the background. The scene is simply an establishing shot, and the fact that Charles is cycling away from it implies the monument’s narrative transience. For Carné and Renoir, the café or courtyard is Paris, and by offering themselves up as the crucible for the narrative, they imply

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<sup>16</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 100.

their wider significance. To this extent, it is the intimate, anti-touristic 'action space' which functions metonymically for the universal urban experience.

Although in film, place is often less crucial to narrative pleasure than character or action, the key poetic realist films of the 1930s foreground staircases, bridges, windows and work-places as the privileged site of the 'person-environment' nexus. They assume particular importance because they are both fundamental in sustaining the film's reality effect and providing unambiguous signifiers to explicit or obscured personal and communal identities. Writing about the fusion of architecture and community in Naples, Walter Benjamin concluded that:

buildings and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades and stairways [...] to become a theatre of the new [...] this is how architecture, the most binding part of the communal rhythm comes into being here [...] each private attitude or act is permeated by streams of communal life.<sup>17</sup>

In chapter 2, we classified the sites of this communal rhythm as cafés, bars, hotels and courtyards. These action spaces are redolent with meaning - when the architecture and the narrative mingle, endless currents of communal rhythm are established and maintained and the intensification of the relationship between a space's architecture and the individuals within creates a stronger sense of community. The importance of the action space stems from its commonality - its architectural homogeneity (one bar looks much the same as another in 1930s French cinema with 'Byrrh', 'Dubonnet' and the *zinc* always foregrounded) and the recurrence of stock characters (irascible *patron*, world-weary *ouvrier*, friendly *gendarme*). Through this powerful combination of familiarity and community, these

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<sup>17</sup> In Guilianiana Bruno, 'City Views: The Voyage of Film Images, in *The Cinematic City*, ed. by David B. Clarke (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 46-58 (p.49).

action spaces become the sites of nostalgia, drama and spectacle. These recurring architectonic motifs create a succession of natural theatres, a particularly apt comment given the intrinsic performativity ascribed to such spaces. Staircases and courtyards are intermediate locations which link together the private sphere of an apartment or hotel room with the wider public ones of cafés, cabarets and workplaces. They are also dramaturgical spaces where important individual or community performances are played out. Their naturalness is rooted in intimacy and simplicity. Stock characters are strongly bound to these spaces (for they assume metonymic functions as the extension of a certain working-class Parisian *quartier*) and are rarely seen *chez eux*; instead, as demonstrated in chapter 5, family rituals will invariably take place within the wider community space.<sup>18</sup>

I have selected the following ‘action spaces’: doors, windows, staircases, bridges, greenhouses, hotels, work places and town squares. Through sequence analyses of key 1930s films (several of which contain one or more of these *loci classicus*), I hope to offer a spatial rendering of the way the spectator ‘reads’ the film which differs from the conventional techniques of sequence analysis like performance, dialogue or editing.

## Doors

Every plot strand ends at a door. Doors open and close, let people in or allow them to leave, invite or banish, conceal and reveal. Schaal argues that a door is an ‘architectural editor’<sup>19</sup> not only because it is the physical embodiment of these

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<sup>18</sup> This trend has continued throughout recent French cinema, most notably in *Marius et Jeanette* (1997) and *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001).

<sup>19</sup> Schaal, p. 94.

comings-and-goings, but also because a door is a prospective gateway, hinting at another entrance or exit, and another, and so on until the architectural simplicity of one room can transmute into an aggregate of spatial possibilities and layered depths.

Close analysis of Renoir's films highlight how important doors are in his work, serving to isolate and differentiate, or to provide moments of inspired farce and pantomime. Like an enlarged version of 'un cadre dans le cadre', the door can momentarily frame the action or image, proscenium arch-style, and draw the audience's attention to a certain object. What Renoir skilfully achieves is a perfect symbiosis of film form and film decor; the architecture *is* the film for a brief instant. The *jeux de portes* in *Boudu sauvé des eaux* and *La Règle du jeu* are important for showing how the decor becomes a crucial narrative and performative catalyst; in the former, the door separates the two adulterous couples - Boudu and Mme. Lestingois (Michel Simon and Marcelle Hainia) in one room; Anne-Marie and Lestingois (Séverine Lerczynska and Charles Granval) in the other - while the chamber games at La Colinière revolve heavily around one door opening as another one closes.

Carné works less theatrically, but often employs the same visual style. Although he generally uses a window to trigger such crucial scenes of (mis)recognition and imprisonment as the ones in *Le Quai des brumes*, *Hôtel du Nord*, *Le Jour se lève* and *Les Enfants du paradis*, several of his films features scenes predicated upon or framed by the image of a window. The door is a crucial action space in Fritz Lang's cinema (*M*, (1931), *Secret Beyond the Door...*, (1948)) and Carné's affinity with Lang's aesthetic style and dependence on a closed conception of space exemplified in the *Kammerspiel* tradition is mirrored in his own work. *Les Portes de la nuit* is heavily charged with door metaphors, not just in the title but also in the numerous

scenes in the film where doors are endlessly opened and closed.<sup>20</sup> In *Le Jour se lève*, the murder of Valentin (Jules Berry) by François (Jean Gabin) is committed behind a closed door, and later on when the police are threatening to storm François's room, he barricades himself in by pushing the large wardrobe against the same door. Doors have an insistent presence in Carné's narrative and their ubiquity hints at an ever-evolving transition not just from functional objects to poetic markers of passage, but also to an increased understanding of a character's own moral and emotional development.

To pass through a door is a symbolic act of widening perception whereas a locked door connotes a sense of entrapment or enclosure. When André (Jean Gabin) finds the jammed door at the deserted beach house in *Remorques*, the audience is primed to the richness of the connotation. Unable to leave his wife but in the throes of a passionate affair, the door is representative not only of emotional conflict but also of moral dilemma.

## Windows

In terms of nature, the window can be an opening to freedom; in terms of theater, it freezes and stylises. In its ambivalence, it resembles the mirror, which can either intensify the superficial or reveal the inner world.<sup>21</sup>

Traditionally, windows stand for 'the eyes of the soul', are sexual orifices in dream symbolism and in horror iconography are the house's eyes. In poetic realism, their

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<sup>20</sup> In a 1972 interview, Carné was asked whether the recurrence of the door motif in his work could be linked back to his mother's death, and whether her death was revealed to the young director from behind a closed door. (Oms, p. 47).

<sup>21</sup> Leo Braudy, *Jean Renoir: The World of His Films* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), p. 81.



significance is varied. The symbol of the window played a key role in Carné's early polemics. In 1932, he urged film-makers to turn their camera lenses out of 'notre fenêtre'. By doing this, a new generation of directors would 'évoquera pour nous le vrai visage d'une France en 1932'.<sup>22</sup>

Cinematically, the window is a further example of an architectural editor, hiding or revealing key points of the narrative. One of Renoir's most famous early images is from *Petite marchande d'allumettes* (1928), when the little match girl (Catherine Hessling) dreams of running through the snow and into a toy shop window which she had previously walked past under the watchful eye of a policeman. Renoir always recognised the positive and negative connotations of windows-as-revealers and throughout the 1930s employed them as powerful symbols of vision. Sequences in film shot through windows encapsulate the traditional concept of the 'image within an image'. In *La Chienne*, several important events take place around a window. Legrand (Michel Simon) paints his self-portrait next to his open window and the camera shows another open window in the background, while in the scene where Legrand steals the money for his lover, Renoir films through a window, repeating this for the climactic scene when Legrand finds his mistress Lulu (Janie Marèze) in bed with her pimp (Georges Flament). The scene in *Une Partie de campagne* when Rodolphe (Jacques Brunius) watches Henriette (Sylvia Bataille) on a swing is shot through a small window, and the proscenium arch styling of the image implies a theatricality and voyeurism that runs through Renoir's work. In *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, the pulling down of the advertising hoarding on Charles's window allows Renoir to use a deep focus shot into the far reaches of the

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<sup>22</sup> Marcel Carné, 'Le Cinéma et le monde, *Cinémagazine*, 12 (November 1932), pp. 9-12 (p. 12).

courtyard, linking the foreground action with the background and effecting a visual reconciliation between the two lovers, Charles and Estelle.

In Carné's poetic realist films, windows are places of communication between private and public, between what is hidden and what is shown. In *Le Jour se lève*, when François first visits Françoise (Jacqueline Laurent), the camera follows him not through the door, but tracks along to the window and frames them, immortalising the couple kissing behind the glass, both as focus of the spectator's gaze and mummified object of Carné's probing camera. Windows act as the interface between the internal and the external, and much of the popular poetic realist iconography is predicated upon Jean Gabin gazing wistfully out of a window (he and Nelly (Michèle Morgan) in *Le Quai des brumes*, he and Clara (Arletty) in *Le Jour se lève*, as well as the scene in the latter film when he shouts down from the window to the assembled community outside). Carné's image of Morgan in her other-worldly raincoat framed against the Panama bar window is also a haunting image that iconicises the themes and concerns of poetic realism. This shot is virtually replicated by Carné in *Hôtel du Nord*, when Renée and Pierre (Annabella and Jean-Pierre Aumont) stare out of the window of the hotel down onto the Canal St. Martin. There is again the juxtaposition of melancholy and impending doom (the suicide pact) with a fatalistic love.

The problematics of 'leaving the window' is a key theme in 1930s cinema, insofar as it implies an extension of the interface between private and public. In *La Chienne*, in the scene when the girl is playing the piano and Legrand is stealing the money, both characters are seemingly cocooned inside their own personal space. They are presumptive of this privacy, and yet their mere proximity to the window implies they are open to the outside world, prone to the wider public community.

Arguably the reason why Gabin is iconicised behind the window is because it is there that his very 'outsider-ness' is predicated and regenerated by the barrier that the window represents. It is only by 'leaving the window'; by venturing out into the world that the collision between individual and overwhelming social forces can be addressed and resolved. By leaving the window and going out into the street, the interface between the public and private is collapsed and a different conception of spatiality can be embraced. This movement from window to street reinforces poetic realism's exploration of the private and public. As the frozen images of Gabin and Morgan behind glass in *Le Quai des brumes* are wordless affairs, it follows that only by leaving the window can forms of communication thrive and endure. In that film, it is only by venturing out onto the street or along the quayside that communication between Jean and Nelly can take place. It is also fitting that Gabin is shot down by Lucien (Pierre Brasseur) on the street: the space has been ritualised to the extent that a functional 'action space' has become a site of anguish. This is the inevitable contrast to the couple gazing out of the Panama window. Jean and Nelly are safe in this liminal space, screened from the deteriorating social forces of Le Havre, but being behind the window is charged with a different kind of negativity: stasis. The window's binary opposite, the street, is characterised as an inherently dangerous and exposed site, and in *Le Quai des brumes*, it is not a site of community, movement and freedom, but a further extension of the window as a melancholic site.

## **Staircases**

Stairs and staircases have always had an especially privileged role in cinematic dramaturgy. As the symbolic spine of the house or soul of the milieu that the film

represents, the staircase is one of the primary architectural images in cinema. Staircases are what might be termed 'plastically symbolic' insofar as they are constructed linking devices, enabling the transferral of character movement onto the decor. They are sites of motion; of ascension, descension and literal movements that carry with them explicitly figurative notions of personal feeling and character development. They have always been familiar places for encounters and clashes, epitomised most strikingly in Hitchcock's thrillers.<sup>23</sup> The staircase's ubiquity in Hollywood cinema has codified it as *raumbildend*. It 'creates space'; whether as a central focal point in *Gone With The Wind* (1939), a metaphor for heaven in *A Matter of Life or Death* (1946) or a recurring space in a Ziegfield Follies dance routine, the value of this action space is reinforced as a favoured point of dynamic motion. Arguably, the distance and proximity that a staircase allows is a reflection of social and power relations that occur between different characters. Ascending a staircase implies exiting from the social stage and withdrawal into privacy, but it may also signal a passage into an entirely private and prohibited realm. Conversely, descending a staircase expresses self-presentation, joining a group and entering the public sphere. Indeed, in *La Belle équipe*, when the 'équipe' discover that they have won the lottery, Tintin (Raymond Aimos) slides down the banisters of the hotel staircase. The architecture is employed here as a figurative symbol for pleasure and enjoyment, turning the space into a regressive 'infant' site.<sup>24</sup>

An obsession with staircases can be traced back to 1920s German cinema. Theorists constantly underlined the link between staircases and sexuality, with Freud

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<sup>23</sup> See Jean Funck, 'Fonctions et significations de l'escalier dans le cinéma d'Alfred Hitchcock', *Positif*, 286 (1984), pp. 30-5. Examples of dramatic uses of staircases include Cary Grant carrying a glass of milk in *Suspicion* (1941), the eternity it takes Leopoldine Konstantin to walk down the stairs towards Ingrid Bergman in *Notorious* (1946) and Arbogast's murder in *Psycho* (1960).

<sup>24</sup> This scene foreshadows another confluence between body and architecture in the film when the men lie on the *guingette* roof to prevent the tiles from being blown away during the storm.

arguing that ascending a staircase was representative of the sexual act while stairs leading to cellar stood for the female sexual organ. An exploration of the staircase as an architectonic device was attempted by theatre critic Herbert Ihering, whose 1922 work *Aktuelle Dramaturgie* analysed the importance of the *Jessnertreppen*. Ihering argued that this set of staircases made famous by the theatre director Leopold Jessner in his stylised production of *Faust* were not simply action spaces but visual elements to be interpreted by the spectator.<sup>25</sup> The dramaturgical function of the staircase was not questioned, but Ihering questioned the use of staircase simply to obtain a pictorial effect. For him, the staircase was as much a reflection of the possibilities that the newly created spatial dimensions offered the narrative. Diametrically opposed to Ihering's observations was René Laurent's study of German Expressionism, *Le Théâtre allemand d'aujourd'hui* (1933) which analysed the function of the *Jessnertreppen* in a different way. For Laurent, the stairs were a strictly symbolic effect which served to 'express exaltation or depression in visual terms' and 'to emphasise psychological or social inferiority or superiority'.<sup>26</sup> For Ihering, the staircases were dramaturgical devices for structuring and dividing space; for Laurent, they symbolised mood and atmosphere. This dichotomy refers back to the central dilemma of cinematic architecture - is decor predicated upon function or beauty? - and highlights how core 'action spaces' contribute to the debate over performance and narrative function.

Poetic realism employs staircases both as a functional device and a stylistic punctuation. In *Le Jour se lève*, François's apartment can only be reached by

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<sup>25</sup> In Eisner, p. 121.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 122.

climbing an ‘interminable escalier’<sup>27</sup> to the top level of the building. The first character to be introduced in the film is the blind man (Georges Douking), seen climbing the staircase before the murder takes place. In *Crime et châtiment*, Raskolnikov (Pierre Blanchard) climbs the stairs to the pawnbroker’s apartment by way of a cut-out, full-size staircase so a complex crane shot can allow the entire ascent to be filmed in one take. Real time adds suspense to the scene, while the circularity of the staircase represents the anguished state of Raskolnikov’s mind.<sup>28</sup> In other poetic realist films, a highly expressionist lighting design would be employed for purely aesthetic effect wherever the action space lent itself. This was particularly the case with stairways where stylised shadows of railings and banisters appear in films such as *Gueule d’amour*, *Hôtel du Nord* and *Remorques*.

The staircase in poetic realism is frequently used to introduce notions of community. Whether characterised by positive or negative connotations, staircases are important linking devices. In *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, the staircase leading off from the central courtyard leads to the various individual communities embedded in the building (laundry, newspaper offices, apartments, dining rooms) and hints at the separately inscribed gendered and classed spaces that exist beyond the totalising community of the courtyard.

In *La Belle équipe*, Jean (Jean Gabin) resides at the Hôtel du Roi d’Angleterre. In the early sequence when he walks down from his room to the courtyard arguing with the concierge about the state of cleanliness in the place, the camera moves with him

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<sup>27</sup> James de Coquet, ‘Le Jour se lève’, *Le Figaro*, 14 June 1939. Collection Rondel R Supp 515, p. 3. Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, Paris. De Coquet argued that the apartment block had been ‘rongé’ (eroded, worn away) by the staircase.

<sup>28</sup> Dostoevsky’s novel was also filmed as *Raskolnikov* by Robert Wiene in 1923. In the film, the student sleeps under a row of black beams which seem to press down implacably onto him. When he climbs the staircase to commit the murder, the haphazard, needle-like banisters seem to draw Raskolnikov towards the door.

as he walks down the various staircases, the thirty-second scene tracking from top to bottom. The notion of community is strongly reinforced in this sequence, and highlights the extent to which Gabin is consistently presented as being in harmony in his environment. He may complain about the state of the apartment, but it is the way in which he commands the space and becomes the focal point which privileges him over the architecture. What the staircase allows him is not just freedom of movement, but a platform on which his character can present itself to both on-screen and off-screen spectator.<sup>29</sup>

Negative notions of community can also be architecturalised by the staircase. In *Pépé le Moko*, the haphazard spatial arrangement of the Casbah is accentuated by the twisting staircases and interlocking steps which facilitate escape from the police and allegorise the French unfathomability of this Other space. As Meunier (René Bergeron) dolefully intones during the documentary-montage of the Casbah: 'chaque terrasse est une marche [...] des escaliers, des montées abruptes comme des échelles, des descentes vers des gouffres sombres et puants'. Moreover, Meunier's anthropomorphic gesture - 'La Casbah est un vaste escalier' - reinforces the contention that the film's sprawling setting has been architecturalised into a single definable 'action space'. On the two occasions when Gabin attempts to leave the Casbah, he does so by descending the long, winding staircase that leads to the *quartier européen* of Algiers. The first attempt was aborted by Inès (Line Noro), while the second leads him to his death. By going down the staircase, Gabin is literally descending to his own downfall.

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<sup>29</sup> There is a similar scene in *Le Jour se lève*, where the camera tracks down the side of the staircase, following François as he leaves his room to go to work. In this scene his whistling and pleasant demeanour establishes a strong rapport with the *immeuble* community and his domestic environment.

## Bridges

Bridges as links to an 'ailleurs' are a recurring metaphor in cinema. Woody Allen uses them as landmarks, as positioning signifiers that anchor the viewer to a recognisable geography (Brooklyn Bridge as a site of nostalgic childhood in *Annie Hall* (1977) or the Queensboro Bridge in *Manhattan* (1979) as a romantic meeting point). In her analysis of *The Birds* (1963), Camille Paglia notes that Hitchcock's vision of architecture as 'the grand but eternally provisional frame of the human meaning' is evident throughout his key films.<sup>30</sup> One example of this frame of human meaning is San Francisco's Golden Gate suspension bridge in *Vertigo* (1958). The bridge in 1930s French cinema is also a key spatial metaphor. In *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932), the bridge over the Seine is not simply the site of the attempted suicide that brings Boudu into the bourgeois world *chez* Lestingois but becomes a significant configuration of the clash between Boudu and Lestingois's social position. The bridge in *Jenny* is a site for negative feeling. After leaving the hospital, Jenny (Françoise Rosay) crosses a bridge and is enveloped by smoke from a passing train. Coupled with the high-pitched train whistle, the smoke (like the fog in *Le Quai des brumes*) acts as an external signifier of Jenny's own inner torment - she has just learned that the man she adores has become her daughter's lover. The image of the smoke and the despondent human presence is reminiscent of Monet's Saint-Lazare tableaux; in both examples, the bridge has become the site of interface between sentiment and symbolism. In Duvivier's *La Charrette fantôme* (1939), the snow-covered arch bridge is the dominant narrative focal point. After the opening credits, the camera tracks across a townscape and zooms towards the bridge. It is the locus

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<sup>30</sup> Camille Paglia, *The Birds* (London: BFI, 1998), p. 66.



of community and acts as a powerful metaphor for social division - beneath the bridge are huddled several tramps keeping warm around makeshift fires; above wander the bourgeoisie and the merchants carrying their goods from one side of the town to the other.

Over sixty years after its release, *Hôtel du Nord* stills retains a mythic place in the pantheon of French cinema. On a recent visit to Paris, I strolled down the pathway of the Canal Saint-Martin, crossing the numerous iron-lattice bridges on the Quai des Jemmapes and observing the north-eastern Parisian area immortalised by Alexandre Trauner's set design. So deeply embedded is the film in the French cultural psyche that the site of the original hotel has now become a fashionable restaurant.<sup>31</sup> To construct the film's bridges, *passerelles* and buildings, Trauner relied on his usual method of meticulous documentation and reconfiguration of existing architecture. His search to *frapper le public* led to the creation of a memorable phantasmagoria that acted as the narrative locus and a site of nostalgic desire. There is also another bridge in the film - the one that Pierre crosses after he believes he has killed Renée. It overlooks a criss-cross network of railway lines and Pierre decides to throw himself over the side, stopping only at the last moment. Here the bridge underpins the suspense of the narrative (will Pierre jump?), but it also a contrast to the bridge at the start and end of the film. The latter is imbued with a reverential and talismanic presence; at this point, the railway bridge is analogous to suicide and despair. Turk

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<sup>31</sup> Yann Piquer's and Philippe Dorison's playful 1985 short film *Atmosphère* also bolsters the *Hôtel du Nord* myth. The camera pans across the bridge and the canal and moves past the current Hôtel du Nord, all to the sound of authentic accordion music and the typical iconography of the film (grilled bars, a wandering couple). The nostalgic mood is somewhat undermined by the fact that all the characters are wearing gas-masks. The couple try to embrace on the bridge, cannot, and so take off their masks, breathing deeply and shouting ecstatically "Atmosphère, atmosphère". They kiss, but because they have removed their gas-masks, collapse, and, according to the radio news bulletin that plays over the credits, die of noxious inhalation.

contends that this scene represents poetic realism 'at its most dense'<sup>32</sup> because all of the various action spaces are discharging symbolic resonance without undermining the verisimilitude of the *mise en scène*. The whole sequence, from Pierre leaving the hotel to climbing onto the bridge is compressed with poetic charge: his rejection of the prostitute implies a continuation of his denial of love, the railway tracks are an apt rendition of Pierre's need for escape, and the bridge facilitates the shift from one state of mind to another.

Although the anthropomorphism of the set recurs throughout the film - scriptwriter Henri Jeanson once declared that *Hôtel du Nord* was a love story between the hotel ('elle') and the canal ('lui')<sup>33</sup> - it is clear that it is the bridge which 'embraye le récit, le clôt et le structure en parties.'<sup>34</sup> At the opening of the film, Pierre and Renée are framed underneath it as they gaze out at the canal, while the revolver that Edmond (Louis Jouvet) buys from the child was found under the bridge. The structuring device of this 'action space' is reinforced by the way it functions as a literal and metaphoric gateway to other spaces in both the diegetic and non-diegetic narrative. The bridge provides access to the main spatial arenas of the hotel and the village square but also provides access to the other side of the canal, to an action space that we are never privy too. This parallel, but invisible spatialisation of events reinforces the bridge as a gateway to multiple narrative possibilities.

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<sup>32</sup> Turk, p. 142.

<sup>33</sup> In Henri Jeanson, *Jeanson par Jeanson* (Paris: René Châteauneuf, 2000), p. 80.

<sup>34</sup> Michel Marie, 'Les cent sous de Nazarède', in *L'Avant-scène cinéma*, 374, (October 1988), pp. 7-12 (p. 3).

## Greenhouses

Greenhouses proliferate in naturalist fiction. In Zola's *La Curée*, the 'serre chaude' is an ambiguous zone (neither inside nor outside, neither removed from Paris nor properly in Paris) where the novel's central semi-incestuous relationship is consummated – the balmy atmosphere exerts the same effect on the protagonists as it does on the plants. Similarly, much of Maurice Maeterlinck's best work is found in *Serres chaudes*, where the soul is claustrophobically imprisoned inside a symbolic hot-house full of animals and plants. Gazing through the opaque glass, the poet equates the decadence inside the greenhouse with his own moral corruption, seeking some form of liberation. There is a further significance in that greenhouses were seen as part of the new architecture of the mid-19th century, and are of the same order as the glass and steel structures of the railway station, the exhibition palace and Baltard's Halles, all of which are ambiguous places in their own right, where nothing is fixed and everything is in circulation.

In *Drôle de drame*, the narrative maps its key spatial co-ordinates through the intricate pattern of returning to certain sites and investing them with pregnant significance. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the greenhouse. By making the *serre* the primary point of departure in the film, Carné emphasises the symbolic and narrative importance of this charged action space.

Along with the apartment building, a key space in *Le Jour se lève* is the greenhouse, the site of the love scene between François and Françoise. Its importance needs to be underlined as it represents the spatial embodiment of a key narrative element of decor - glass. Much has already been written about the mirror

in François's room.<sup>35</sup> Mirrors enable the two-dimensionality of the screen to impinge onto the three-dimensionality it represents and also offer moments of character self-examination or symbolise the various spatial fields that the narrative could develop into.

Perhaps more significant is the importance of the greenhouse as 'un espace propre'. Exploring greenhouses in Zola's fiction, Tonard notes that they represent 'l'idée de clarté et de l'insouciance de vivre'.<sup>36</sup> This dichotomy is clearly delineated in Carné's film, where the transparency of the greenhouse can weave together interior and exterior and subsume space into one place. Instead of there being a recognisable inside and outside, the transparent space blurs the boundaries between private and public. If everything is visible, then the protagonist can just as easily fall victim to insecurity as to pleasure, because there are no structuring divisions between what can be seen and what can be hidden. The greenhouse may be full of flowers but they are flowers trapped under glass. Only the illusion of real landscape can be offered by greenhouse, and as such becomes a metaphor for the illusory happiness experienced by François. It is also in the greenhouse that Françoise tells François that Valentin is not her father and promises never to see him again. Thiher has argued that this is one of the most important shots in the film, because the camera, situated outside the greenhouse, frames the couple in the background, while in the foreground, white flowers line the bottom edge of the frame. He suggests that this shot 'underscores how the decor separates the couple and the outer world'<sup>37</sup> at precisely that moment when they are indulging in romantic fantasies. Although I

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<sup>35</sup> See François Vanoosthuyse, 'Le Jour se lève, identification d'un prolétaire', in *CinémAction*, 98 (2001), pp. 66-72 and Bazin, p. 91.

<sup>36</sup> Jean-François Tonard, *Thématique et symbolique de l'espace clos dans le cycle des Rougon-Macquart d'Emile Zola* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 129.

<sup>37</sup> Allen Thiher, *The Cinematic Muse: Critical Studies in the History of French Cinema* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1979), p. 122.

would disagree with Thiher's reading that the camera is *outside* the greenhouse (there seems no evidence of this), he is right to draw attention to the way in which the greenhouse is configured as an artificial illusory place. Both the flowers and the lovers are trapped in the confines of the greenhouse; like butterflies trapped under glass, any hint of freedom or permanence is offset by the negativity of the action space.

Another example of the betraying nature of the greenhouse occurs in *La Règle du jeu*, when Schumacher (Gaston Modot) and Marceau (Julien Carette) hide outside the greenhouse on the de la Chesnaye estate and inadvertently shoot André Jurieu (Roland Toutain). On this occasion, mistaken identity and the misreading of signs have undermined the apparent surface reality. Despite the transparent nature of a site made predominantly of glass, the greenhouse has been codified as an impenetrable space that conceals rather than reveals. Bazin recognised this dual quality of glass, seeing it as 'matière transparente et réfléchissante, à la fois loyale, puisqu'elle laisse voir au travers, et trompeuse, puisque cependant elle sépare'.<sup>38</sup> Space is collapsed and viewpoint multiplied, paradoxically increasing the sense of opacity in this scene. Although mirrors and glass may superficially enhance our viewing perspective and multiply the possibility of seeing, both greenhouse sequences thrive on this paradox. What becomes important is the deceptiveness of these spaces and the illusion of open space generated by the multiplicity inherent in transparency.

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<sup>38</sup> Bazin, p. 91.

## Hotels

Hotels and their lobbies are simultaneously ‘hyperspace and heterotopia, the non-places that link all places’.<sup>39</sup> By virtue of their architectural usefulness (they can provide residence for many people) and their narrative neatness (by allowing for everybody to be ‘under the same roof’), hotels play a crucial part in 1930s poetic realism, whether as eponymous setting in *Pension Mimosas* and *Hôtel du Nord* or ‘action space’, where characters can interact and narrative complexities intertwine, as in *La Belle équipe* or *Le Jour se lève*. It is in hotels that we experience both ‘place’ and ‘difference’; a sense of belonging and of community (or an extension of Foucault’s heterotopia) but also a sense of the unknown and isolation. Both values are attached to the hotel space in poetic realist cinema. This idea is exemplified in *Hotel du Nord*, where amidst the vibrant sense of community is an outsider. Although the democratic space of hotel lobby purports to link together everybody who stands, sits or talks there, beyond this linking staging post the hotel becomes a space of division and isolation. This is made more explicit through the interior decoration of the individual rooms. The opening First Communion party takes place in the dining room, which is adorned with posters of Byrrh. The recurrence of this is a reassuring narrative anchor - we know exactly where we are and a feeling of community is immediately established. Pierre and Renée choose room 16, and the barren, sparse decor within is indicative of their mental states. Contrasted to this is Edmond and Raymonde’s room, full of ephemera and random objects that connote domesticity and a certain warmth.

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<sup>39</sup> Ross King, ‘Hotels’, in *City A-Z*, ed. by Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift, (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 111-3 (p. 111).

Public open spaces like hotels are spaces of safety, of community, but they can quickly be subverted and turned from positively into negatively charged spatial configurations. Indeed, an iconoclastic film-maker will distort and undermine the spatial orthodoxy and implied positivity of such a space and allude to more darker, hidden meanings.<sup>40</sup> In *Hôtel du Nord*, the hotel is the architectural embodiment of a number of important spatial subdivisions - bar, hall, and individual rooms - and allows for the possibility for narrative interpenetration. The lobby looks onto several spaces, and becomes the key focal and returning point for the narrative.

Trauner has argued that a hotel room is the hardest decor to design and construct effectively because of the space's inherent 'impersonnalité'.<sup>41</sup> In an individual's room, the designer can import objects and decor fragments which reflect social status or personality, whereas a hotel room's anonymity and paucity of decorative elements can prevent an accurate reconceptualisation. The interior space and decor of a hotel can define the contrast between individual lifestyles.

## Work places

In *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, Batala's office is a resolutely closed place. He is forever closing windows and doors, especially when dealing with and exploiting women. The *huis clos* aspect of his office is accentuated when he seduces Estelle in the corner of his office (this effect is cleverly mirrored after Batala has been shot, pinned against the drinking well in the corner of the courtyard). Likewise, the

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<sup>40</sup> The hotel lobby in *Key Largo* (1948) is codified at the outset as a place of shelter and community (Humphrey Bogart shares a drink with Lionel Barrymore) but then, with the progression of the narrative, becomes a *huis clos* of tormented emotions, its claustrophobia explicitly personified by Edward G. Robinson's profuse perspiration and the thunderstorm outside.

<sup>41</sup> Michel Ciment and Isabelle Jordan, 'Entretien avec Alexandre Trauner (I)', *Positif*, 223 (October 1979), pp. 4-19 (p.19).

furniture in this space is also charged with domineering connotations: heavy filing cabinets, wide desk and closed windows. When this *mise en scène* is compared to Lange's (René Lefèvre) work space, a number of key dialectics are established. Although Lange's office is also his bedroom (and therefore more analogous with the occupant's personal taste), the differences with Batala's own space are marked - Renoir's restless camera takes in all of the Arizona Jim paraphernalia, and Lange's windows are always opened and he is often framed against a doorway.

In *La Bête humaine*, much of the action takes place at St. Lazare station, which becomes a primal arena for the emergence of blind, immutable forces. As a metaphor for the transgressability and ephemerality of space, the railway station is the starting and ending point for the journeys of the protagonists. The transparency of the station (glass ceilings and windows) collapses the boundaries between visible and non-visible, rupturing the sense of division between the various spaces in and around St. Lazare. As Jacques Lantier, Gabin is imprisoned in a hermetic universe in which the 'here and now-ness' of the space is relentlessly negative. When Séverine (Simone Simon) tells him that 'devant nous, c'est barré', she metaphorises Jacques's milieu, codifying it as the paradoxically imprisoning and transparent station which offers little refuge from the oppressiveness of the Le Havre or Parisian urban trauma.

The sand-blasting workshop in *Le Jour se lève* is also a revealing action space and it sets up several strands of object-association which coalesce later on in the narrative. Our first glimpse of François is in the work place, after the camera has tracked along several individual partitions. These partitions separate off the workers thus introducing an immediate thematic concern of the film: isolation and entrapment. Gabin is cocooned behind his protective mask, but he is also separated



from his men by the partition, a separation that echoes the end of the film when he shouts down from his apartment to the men in the town square.

## Town squares

The meaning of disencumbered squares in the city centers (forums and marketplaces) has become essentially different. Only rarely are they now used for the great popular festivals, and everyday life continually retreats further away. Often they fulfil no other function than to procure more air and light, to break the monotony of the sea of houses, or, at most, to free up the perspective on one important edifice or another, so as to better highlight its architectonic effect.<sup>42</sup>

It is interesting that Camillo Sitte's somewhat pessimistic pronouncement should have been made at a time when the public square had not yet been enshrined as a key 'action space' in 1930s French cinema. It is true that nowadays town squares have become increasingly antiquated, devoid of real function other than a decorative stylisation to 'free up the perspective' on a new municipal super-structure. Yet several films of the period contain scenes in which a town square plays an important part, either as functional container of action, as a site of nostalgia, or as the intensification of a community which moves out of the private space of the home and into the public sphere of the all-encompassing town square. Ever since Classical Greece, and later Renaissance Italy, the public square was synonymous with political life, representing a spatialisation of the political participation of the town population. These squares also assumed a kind of civilising influence, creating a space wherein public consciousness and recreation might be fostered and enjoyed. This is undoubtedly true of poetic realist cinema; the town square is an 'action space' in

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<sup>42</sup> Camillo Sitte, *L'Art de bâtir les villes, l'urbanisme selon ses fondements artistiques*, trans. by D. Wiczorek (Paris: Livre et Communication, 1990), p. 4.

several senses: a place to meet, a place for festivity, a place for demonstration or argument, a place imbued with community spirit. In *Quatorze juillet*, the town square is an external spatialisation of that spirit and Meerson's set design architecturalises the emotions of the protagonists. To recall *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, for instance, is to recognise how the concentric rings of the paving stones and the undeniable narrative importance of the courtyard underline the way in which this constricted space has become the community's 'town square' - a place of camaraderie, crime and claustrophobia. It is in the town square that a certain ritualisation of spatial usage can be perceived. That the film's original title was to be *Sur la cour* offers a clear indication that the courtyard was to be not only container of action but also codified as the narrative focal point.

Towards the close of *Le Jour se lève* there is a shot of François's workers and friends looking up from the town square and calling out to him. Carné and Prévert introduce the notion of a Greek chorus, which in turn codifies the decor of the film as an important political space. By trying to cheer François up and deter him from suicide, the workers invoke class solidarity and communal bonds. Linked together by common clothes, working-class accent and the possession of bicycles, the men in the town square are explicitly codified as a collective space bound together by friendship and iconography. That the square is turned into a battleground, heralded by the arrival of police vans and faceless armed troops is a definite recognition of the way communal action spaces (the sand-blasting factory, the greenhouse, the *immeuble*) have been imbued with a demoralising and negative value.

## CASE STUDY: a decor analysis of *Un Carnet de bal*

Places in poetic realism reveal character, and action spaces are primarily chosen for thematic reinforcement. *Un Carnet de bal* has never been historically labelled a poetic realist film, due perhaps to its melodramatic overtones, eschewal of implicit social criticism, and open, fluid camera style. Duvivier's ensemble film garnered the prestigious Best Foreign Film award at the 1937 Venice Film Festival, and is perhaps remembered for the extraordinary reunion of 1930s French cinema's most prestigious actors. If the storyline is unremarkable (recently widowed socialite visits those names on her 'carnet de bal'), what is extraordinary about the film is the number of different locations embedded in the narrative. In what would perhaps today be termed a 'melodrama road movie', the heroine, Christine (Marie Bell) travels around France going to different places to trace the men with whom she danced at her first social *soirée*. Perhaps more than any other film of the 1930s, *Un Carnet de bal* emphasises place above narrative; it is the settings that propel the narrative. As designed by Serge Pimenoff, the film juxtaposes a symbolic use of quotidian environments with surreal and exotic settings. To paraphrase Foster Hirsch, *Un Carnet de bal* 'exploits the oddness of odd settings, as it transforms the mundane quality of familiar ones, in order to create an environment that pulses with intimations of nightmare.'<sup>43</sup> If nightmare is too strong a word here (Hirsch's words relate to *film noir*), the constant kaleidoscoping of place induces a strong sense of motion sickness in Christine. On several occasions, her memories of the *bal* are triggered by a word or look and the subsequent daydreams seem provoked and prompted by her continual movement.

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<sup>43</sup> Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (New York: Barnes, 1981), p. 86.

The film opens with a pan across an Alpine lake, with conventional images of fir trees, dappled light and idyllic calm. This initial shot serves a triple function : as establishing shot, as an Impressionistic rendering of a rural scene, and as a visual signifier of the totality of the natural landscape. This final observation is crucial insofar as I believe the use of both natural and built spaces throughout the film are consciously designed and framed so as to dwarf the human figures that they contain.<sup>44</sup>

The dissolve to Christine's apartment reveals an exemplar of 1930s interior studio design. Throughout the narrative, furniture and decor fragments are instrumental in establishing mood and character. She is surrounded by ostentation - finely crafted furniture, carved chairs and lustrous surfaces which reflect back onto the protagonist and the audience the sheer dimension of this aristocratic and luxurious space. It is an impeccable design scheme, accentuated further by a concentrated light source which casts stark shadows across the room. There then follows a memorable scene in which the decor literally changes before our eyes, and the empty space fills up with dancers, musicians and diegetic sound. The room has become a literal *lieu de mémoire*, whereby Christine's interior daydreaming has conjured up a diegetic reconfiguration of the *bal*.<sup>45</sup>

Christine leaves for Paris, and the first name on the 'carnet de bal' is George Audié.

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<sup>44</sup> Similar examples of this period include the closing shot of *La Grande illusion*, in which Jean Gabin and Marcel Dalio trudge through the Swiss Alps, or Amédée and Valentine framed against an immense grey sky at the end of *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*. In all three cases, the monumentality of the setting dominates the protagonists. By rhapsodising the natural landscape, these sequences all seem to hint at man's powerlessness over nature and his diminished influence within its expansive parameters.

<sup>45</sup> The scene anticipates a similar one in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), in which Gene Kelly enters a party-filled room, turns around and sees Cyd Charisse at the door. The rest of the party-goers dissolve, leaving the stage free for Kelly's and Charisse's memorable dance.

We learn that he has committed suicide, but his mother (Françoise Rosay) welcomes her in and tells her that George will return. The claustrophobic, cramped spaces of the Paris apartment are important signifiers of Mme. Audié's emotional state. The pan around Georges's room is revealing - the camera lingers on objects (a deck of cards, a pipe, a globe), but unlike the objects in *Le Jour se lève* which overtly function as objective correlatives, these accessories help create an austere, mummified space. A calendar is set to December 1919 (when George died), whilst the low lighting levels and drawn curtains in his room emblematised the mood of this unsettling scene.

Her next stop is a night-club owned by Pierre Verdier (Louis Jouvet). The set dressing is important in this scene for establishing a sense of decadence and opulence. A large picture of Josephine Baker dominates the establishing shot; her presence hinting at the mood and atmosphere of a recurring action space of 1930s cinema. The nightclub itself is sparsely decorated (with periodic shots of bar, dance-floor, tables) and this sparseness is complemented by the jazz music and debonair costumes. This is a site of modernity; of wealth, and the *mise en scene* exploits and underlines this idea.

Contrasted to this hedonism is the next sequence at Chartres, where Alain Regnault (Harry Baur) is a priest who joined the church to forget that he once loved Christine. The Gothic environment is reinforced by the spartan decor; the wood and stone contrasting to the previous scene of metal and sheen in the nightclub. The whole scene is characterised by coldness and entrapment, from the snow visible outside the heavy iron-latticed window to the frigidity of Baur and Bell's interchanges.

The snow motif is continued in the next scene, at the Val d'Isère, as is the theme of religion. A large church-tower overlook the skiers, whilst in the background stand the snow-capped mountains. The pictorial insertion of a real avalanche lends realism to the scene, and the refuge that Christine and Eric Irdin (Pierre-Richard Willm) take in the wood cabin is a site of domesticity.

When Christine visits François Palusset (Raimu), the mayor of a small town who is about to get married, the whole town is preparing for the occasion by decorating the streets with garlands, flowers and bunting. His house is a cluttered space (he spends the entire scene searching for a button), and the never-ending presence of flowers hints at a lighter, less austere tone than the previous scenes.

Her visit to Thierry Regnal (Pierre Blanchard) in Marseilles is punctuated by one of the most impressive designed and visually inventive sequences of 1930s French cinema. He is a back-street abortionist whose office is situated directly behind the dockside. There is pictorial importing to establish a sense of place (as with *Le Quai des brumes*, there are multiple shots of cranes and pylons), and then a move into the studio-designed room. Due to the skewed perspective of the camera placement, the whole place seems to be on at least a 30° incline, and the cumulative effect is extremely disorientating. Reynal is blind in one eye and his affliction is reflected back in the set design. In his review of the film, Graham Greene observed:

Nostalgia, sentiment, regret: the padded and opulent emotions wither before the evil detail: the camera shoots at a slant so that the dingy flat wears like a sinking ship. You have to struggle to the door, but you can run downhill to the medical couch and the bead curtains.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Graham Greene, 'Un Carnet de bal', *Night and Day*, 9 December 1937, repr. in *The Pleasure-Dome: the collected film criticism of Graham Greene: 1935-1940*, ed. by John Russell Taylor (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), p. 184.

This scene, with its architectural haphazardness and skewed perspective, is a perfect objective correlative for fractured psyche and narrative pessimism. The pictorial distortions in the Marseilles clinic carry a strong metaphysical charge, for the unexpected angles affect the spectator in a way entirely different from the gentle gradients and orthodox spatiality of previous scenes. The undulating floorboards, sloping walls and tilting angles in this scene recall Anton Grot's stylised settings for *Svengali* (1931), where the unbalanced mind of the villainous Svengali (John Barrymore) and the overall mood of unease were accentuated by the set design. In both cases, Grot and Pimenoff have used distorted furniture and architectural fragments to imply personality and disassociation.

Her final sojourn is at a hairdresser's owned by Fabien Coutissol (Fernandel). Before she enters, she visits a *papeterie* and spins round a postcard carousel. Duvivier's camera focuses on the spinning images, which seem to exemplify the film's travelogue narrative. Although the design scheme in the hairdressers is generally uninspired, the scene permits a sense of narrative circularity when Fernandel takes Christine to the place of her first ball. Decor can evoke the richness of memory, but in this instance it is an unassuming room, slightly austere and tawdry, which is far removed from the place she grew up in her dreams. Yet is this not what happens when we often return to places of our childhood and find that we have outgrown them; that our original heightened perceptions of them are never as idealised with hindsight?

If place can stimulate memory and facilitate a return to the illusory, then *Un Carnet de bal* exploits this notion to such an extent that the film transforms into a kind of imaginary journey. The discovery of the 'carnet de bal' is merely a macguffin, serving as Christine's *madeleine de Proust* to send her back to a different

time and place. Place often implies displacement, and road movies in particular exploit this notion of 'a stranger in a strange land'. Christine's journey is as much a journey of the mind, and it is primarily the decor that acts as structuring device, differentiating people and place and reflecting back to Christine and the audience a sense of time, place and emotion.

## Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been hopefully to demonstrate the importance of action spaces in poetic realist cinema. They enable an intensification of emotional development, both from protagonist and spectator, and combine the functionalism of the original decor with a transcendental, often hallucinatory quality to provide a denser, more richly textured interpretation of the *mise en scène*. Braudy has argued that film partly defines and partly creates the locations they take for backdrops because directors 'have chosen to look at them closely and use them to tell a story' and so, like film stars, actual settings are 'to be approached with cautious reverence for their new atmosphere of reality'.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, the idea of the 'décor-vedette' runs throughout poetic realism. If the majority of the budget for a certain film has been used to construct the kind of super-structures that frequently dominate poetic realist films, then it follows that the construction will become the focal point of the film. This is undoubtedly true of Trauner's reconstruction of the bridge in *Hôtel du Nord*, in which the reputation and sheer size and scale of the bridge brought a certain level of public curiosity to the

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<sup>47</sup> Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films* (New York: Anchor Press and Doubleday, 1976), p. 23.



film. Trauner recalls how the set design became one of the selling points of the film and that the producer of the film invited journalists to come and see the set. That the budget for the decor was paid for by the ensuing publicity confirmed the bridge as an attraction in itself.<sup>48</sup> Contrasted to this was the recreation of the Barbès-Rochechouart metro station in *Les Portes de la nuit* (1946). A frequently cited example of the way in which spectacle cinema can become a *folie de grandeur*, Trauner's lavish representation of the metro station smacked not just of profligacy but also of 'unmodernity'. Films like Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (1945) and Clément's *La Bataille du rail* (1946) celebrated the authenticity of urban actuality through location shooting, while the Carné-Trauner collaboration was overbalanced by artistic hubris. This 'action space' ultimately revealed nothing more than its own monumentality, shorn of any narrative or functional purpose.

In poetic realism, architecture acquires an emotional sense through a kind of poetic process, whereby anonymous action spaces and common settings are converted into a visual metaphor for the spectator. Cinema and architecture (as all art) function as alluring projection screens for our emotions. Even a building devoid of any intrinsic quality or worth obliges us to lend our emotions and place them into it. Because the legibility of a city image is what allows it to become a powerful basis for affective associations and metaphoric values, it follows that how the city dweller interprets what is put before him will determine his relationship to and mapping of that urban space. What the poetic realist action space effects is the emotionalising of architecture, where basic design fragments are imbued with a capacity to evoke distinctive audience responses. Walter Benjamin once argued that anyone who concentrates on a work of art for long enough is absorbed by it - in

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<sup>48</sup> Jean-Pierre Berthomé, *Alexandre Trauner: décors de cinéma* (Paris: Jade-Flammarion, 1988), p. 42.

poetic realism, it is by concentrating on prosaic decor elements that the spectator can absorb the stylistic and the decorative. This harmonisation of architecture-as-functionalism and architecture-as-decoration enabled 1930s poetic realist films to achieve this synthesis of the banal (a building in a denuded urban space) and the poetic (this same building symbolising a multitude of emotional correspondences) and force the spectator to look at commonplace decor in a transformed light.

Action spaces can be traced back to German Expressionism and the *Kammerspielfilme* but can also be explicitly connected to the increase in ephemera and paraphernalia inscribed in the set designs of poetic realist cinema, enabling a more symbolic reading of the sets and the built spaces themselves. Moreover, the increase in more ornate set designs and stylisations, due largely to the desire of 1930s designers to experiment with shapes and forms, allowed a greater emphasis to be placed on the set design to perform supra-narrative functions. In the final chapter, I will continue with this exploration of decoration and functionalism by examining the micro-dimension of the design process, the object, which, like the ‘action space’, is frequently imbued with an extra-literal meaning.

## Chapter 7 - 'The careful accessory': object associations in poetic realism

Film returns to us and extends our first fascination with objects, with their inner and fixed lives.<sup>1</sup>

No object, no motif, in films is necessarily only what it can be defined as in the outside world; it may have a greater or lesser relation to that definition, but it is never the same.<sup>2</sup>

Now I have to say that I am already on very bad terms with the inanimate world. Even when making a cup of coffee or changing a lightbulb (or a fuse!), I think - what is it with objects? Why are they so aggressive? What's their beef with *me*? Objects and I, we can't go on like this. We must work out a compromise, a freeze, before one of us does something rash. I've got to meet with their people and hammer out a deal.<sup>3</sup>

Graham Greene once noted 'the immense importance of the careful accessory'<sup>4</sup> in poetic realism, Jean Grémillon argued that French cinema was at its most French when it established 'des harmonies, des relations inconnues entre les objets et les êtres'<sup>5</sup>, and numerous recent historiographical studies of 1930s French cinema have commented upon the crucial interplay between object and subject.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter will focus on the microdimension of the cinematic design process - the object, or prop. I intend to highlight how audience perception of the cinematic object is crucial in forming an affective relationship with the cinematic environment and that by viewing a series of apprehensible, graspable objects the audience is grounded in a familiar world. As the camera lingers over objects, their importance is

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What we See in Films* (New York: Anchor Press and Doubleday, 1976), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Amis, *God's Dice* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Graham Greene, 'Hôtel du Nord', *The Spectator*, 23 June 1939, repr. in *The Pleasure-Dome: the collected film criticism of Graham Greene: 1935-1940*, ed. by John Russell Taylor (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), pp. 229-30. (p.230). Greene drew particular attention to the tuft of cotton-wool in Jean-Pierre Aumont's ear which 'seems to speak of a whole timid and untidy life.'

<sup>5</sup> Henri Agel, *Jean Grémillon* (Paris: Seghers, 1969), pp. 169-70.

<sup>6</sup> See Inez Hedges, 'Form and Meaning in the French Film, I: Time and Space', *The French Review*, 14:1 (1980), pp. 28-36, Allen Thiher, *The Cinematic Muse: Critical Studies in the History of French Cinema* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1979), pp. 113-28 and Guy Jacob, 'Situation de Jacques Prévert', *Premier Plan*, 14 (1960), pp. 5-15.

increased and they begin to break out of the narrative mould they were originally assigned. Heightened close-ups of inanimate objects which become the central focus of visual orientation have played a crucial narrative role since cinema's inception. An object in the background of the frame can function as decorative signifier or a method of establishing part of the whole, but when isolated in close up, an object can operate as a discreet mirror of character and milieu or can be charged with a powerful allegorical significance. These supportive icons, far from being neutral or insignificant, become rich repositories of meaning.

Objects are thematic pointers: they conceal and reveal, simplify and stylise, function as expressive detail and are the intended focus of the spectator's gaze. They have been used to great effect throughout American cinema - Astaire dancing with a hat-stand in *Royal Wedding* (1951) or \$40,000 wrapped in a newspaper in *Psycho* (1960) - and in German Expressionism, there had always been a pronounced tendency to imbue objects with a malign power. This anthropomorphic view of existence inherent in Expressionism was epitomised by the projection of human emotions and attitudes onto objects which in turn became emblematic of the themes of isolation and disassociation predominant in German film narrative in the 1920s.<sup>7</sup>

In 'Der sichtbare Mensch' [The Visible Human Being], Béla Balázs argued that this process of objects and the object world not appearing to be as it first seemed was indicative of the way in which humanity had become accustomed to everyday objects and had failed to recognise their innate essence. In the essay, Balázs argued for an anthropomorphic poetics of film theory, claiming that film had democratised reality. Because everything had become visible - and if visibility was the

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<sup>7</sup> See Stephen Jenkins, 'Lang: Fear and Desire' pp. 38-124, esp. pp. 52-60, in *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look*, ed. by Stephen Jenkins (London: BFI, 1981). 'Die Tücke des Objekts' [the maliciousness of the object] is still used in the German language today to refer to someone who cannot make a tool or object work properly.

prerequisite of significance - then man could no longer enjoy pre-eminence in the world; in the shared silence, submerged contents would surface. As these inanimate things became homogeneous with people, they gained thereby in vitality and significance.<sup>8</sup>

Louis Delluc's concept of *photogénie*, developed in 1920, was likewise predicated on the ability of cinema to render an object, milieu or character in an expressive way. Defined by David Bordwell as 'the transforming, revelatory power of cinema: transforming because [it] surpasses sheer literal reproduction of reality; revelatory because it presents a fresh perspective upon reality'<sup>9</sup>, *photogénie* reinforced notions of the uncanniness and defamiliarisation of familiar objects that could be effected through camera technique, aggressive spotlighting or unorthodox framing.

Throughout 1930s French cinema, there are simultaneously implicit and explicit levels of meaning and extra-literal resonances reverberating throughout the narrative, and although not all the films bear up to close scrutiny, many are redolent in meaning. Very often an object reveals nothing more than its own opacity, leading to an inexhaustible possibility of reading and re-reading the on-screen objects. Because all objects carry with them an in-built series of connotations, whenever a designer selects an object to reinforce a narrative theme, those 'unselected' associations may remain, leading to the potential possibility of misinterpretation. As Charles Tashiro argues, the marshalling of a range of objects by the set designer can lead to the introduction of objects which 'can easily jam the clean development of the narrative with semantic static'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Béla Balázs, 'Der Sichtbare Mensch', in *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. by Edith Bone (London: Dennis Dobson, 1952), pp. 39-45.

<sup>9</sup> David Bordwell, *French Impressionist Cinema: Film Culture, Film Theory and Film Style* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Shiro Tashiro, "'Reading" Design in *The Go-Between*', *Cinema Journal*, 33:1 (1993), pp. 17-34 (p. 18).

However, the most effective poetic realist films are those whose design relies upon an economy of means, and there are several films whose *mise en scène* are infinitely more readable than many of the more formulaic, less design-conscious films of this period. The proliferation and foregrounding of objects in *La Grande illusion* and *Le Jour se lève* allow the spectator to go beyond the object, penetrate the surface of its objective reality and enter a new form of complex ambiguity and subjective meaning. Through a careful process of selection and organisation, objects within both screen space and built space assume a far greater impact than a slavish integration into the cinematic frame of ephemera and peripheral objects.

In the highly claustrophobic settings of poetic realist films, objects become increasingly important as a way of creating a nexus of mental associations which in turn interpret characters and relationships. Susan Hayward argues that objects measure 'the state of degeneration as the protagonist responds to their recurrence in the film'<sup>11</sup>, implicitly corroborating the notion that the *mise en scène* of poetic realism can externalise inner emotions. For example, the broken compact mirror in *Sous les toits de Paris* is emblematic of the narrative's concerns with beauty and fragility, in *Le Jour se lève* window bars, birdcages, clocks and banisters function as images of entrapment and foreshadow impending doom, and the ship-in-a-bottle in *Le Quai des brumes* is a perfect rendering of Gabin's emotional state - enclosed, isolated and static, foreshadowing his own fate after it has been destroyed during a gunfight.

Indeed, very few films of this period foreground objects imbued with any form of optimistic, life-enhancing or uplifting connotation: the record-players on the

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 151.

conveyor belt in *A nous la liberté*, a paper-knife in *La Chienne*, the gold pocket-watch in *La Bête humaine*, music boxes in *La Règle du jeu* and the bracelet in *Pièges* are all objects embodying a wider general malaise, either communal or individual. Even the white flowers brought by Françoise (Jacqueline Laurent) into the sandblasting workshop in *Le Jour se lève* have wilted within moments, and the huge bouquet in *Les Enfants du paradis* is destroyed by Baptiste (Jean-Louis Barrault) in a jealous rage. This transferral of negativity onto objects in poetic realism reinforces the way in which props can possess an inner transformative power that affects the narrative. The object is imbued with a symbolic power that is determined not from within itself, but from without, by the demands of the narrative and the causal effects accorded it. The tragic structure inherent in poetic realism appropriates these common objects and makes them function connotatively to signify the states of mind and tragic themes that run throughout the narrative.

The proliferation of objects in these films stem in part from the privileging of the object within the Surrealist movement. If, as Claire Blakeway entreats film historians to do, French masterpieces from the 30s and 40s should be placed ‘in the context of the very French tradition in cinema of [...] feeding on the heritage of Surrealism’<sup>12</sup>, then there is no better starting point than Louis Aragon’s important essay ‘Du Décor’, written in 1918. He, along with other film-makers, artists and poets of the 1920s, regarded the disparate, often illogical arrangements of objects as a method for classifying them as transcendent symbols of a higher reality. The essay is doubly important, for it not only represents the first sustained appraisal of decor and objects in French cinema histories, but it also contains three important

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<sup>12</sup> Claire Blakeway, *Jacques Prévert: Popular French Theatre and Cinema* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), p. 177.

revelations on the specificity of decor and objects that shall be discussed in greater depth in this chapter. Subsequent 'thing theories' proposed by André Bazin and Roland Barthes implicitly allude to Aragon's essay, and create a structural and conceptual daisy chain to link together the three imbricated hypotheses.

## Objects and Surrealism

Aragon's essay in *Le Film* espoused the careful use in cinema of objects and things and showed how, once harnessed into the totality of the narrative, these artefacts could be of crucial metaphysical importance. He argued that:

La porte d'un bar qui bat et sur sa vitre les lettres capitales de mots illisibles et merveilleux, ou la vertigineuse façade aux mille yeux de la maison à trente étages, ou cet étalage enthousiasmant de boîtes de conserves [...] Ou ce comptoir avec l'étagère aux bouteilles qui rend ivre à sa vue: tous fonds si nouveaux malgré cent redites qu'ils créent une neuve poésie pour les cœurs dignes de vivement sentir.<sup>13</sup>

He proposed that cinema could isolate and magnify objects through framing, and especially through close-ups. Aragon continues in this celebration of realism, referring to the multitude and fascination of 'hieroglyphics on walls' (advertising, letters, signs inherent in contemporary cinema. Like the transformation of the raw semiotic function of the hieroglyphic after deciphering, so too can space and the things that occupy it intensify expression by endowing the simple, the mundane or

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<sup>13</sup> Louis Aragon, 'Du Décor', *Le Film*, 131 (16 September 1918), pp. 8-10 (p. 8).



the seemingly unimportant with a poetic value that outstrips its original function.<sup>14</sup> It is with this mode of analysis that Aragon then entreats the reader to study the decor in Chaplin's films, where examples of the intersection of decor and the body - the anthropomorphism of the former, the architecturalisation of the latter - can be found.

Aragon's essay introduces some of the key ideas of Surrealism, which one might broadly define as a re-enchantment of reality; that beyond the superficial reality of quotidian appearances lies a deeper, more intensified reality which is waiting to be explored. Surrealism argued for a pure psychic automatism or free-association which allowed the sub-conscious mind to flow to the surface. Through an extension of the Heisenberg principle ('the very act of observing something changes its nature'), any object, looked at for long enough, could turn into something unreal and disassociative. Aragon underlined this:

Doter d'une valeur poétique ce qui n'en possédait pas encore, restreindre à volonté le champ objectif pour intensifier l'expression, voilà deux propriétés qui contribuent à faire du décor cinématographique le cadre adéquat de la beauté moderne.<sup>15</sup>

It was this combination of the beautiful and the banal and the teasing out of latent meanings in the most mundane of conventional objects that typified Surrealism. Whether this was Man Ray's pictures of metronomes with eyes, Magritte's *The Spoiler* (1935), or Breton's uncovering of 'le merveilleux' in *Nadja* (1928), the

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<sup>14</sup> This way of looking beyond the frame's composite elements to draw out a deeper, more richly satisfying meaning can be connected to Teshome H. Gabriel's 'wax and gold' theory. Gabriel has argued that a reading of a film can be linked back to the African poetic form known as 'sem-enna-worq' (literally, 'wax and gold'). In practice it refers to the process of goldmaking, in which the goldsmith will use a wax form of gold, build the clay mould around it, drain out the wax and then pour in the molten gold. Applied to aesthetics, Gabriel suggests that this process implies two levels of interpretation: the 'wax' is the most obvious and superficial meaning; the 'gold' embedded in the art work provides the true meaning, or, more simply, attaining the maximum of ideas through the minimum of images. See Laura Mulvey, 'The Carapace That Failed: Ousmane Sembene's "Xala"', in Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press and BFI, 1996), pp. 118-135.

<sup>15</sup> Aragon, p. 9.

Surrealists sought to make the spectator to see ordinary things as they had never seen them before. For Breton, that meant the unexpected meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table, or, as Claire Blakeway argues, 'Even the most banal objects, answering to the call of our unconscious desires, had significance and could enrich our lives.'<sup>16</sup>

The proliferation of ephemera coupled with this theme of object anthropomorphism was further suggested in Breton's 1935 *Situation surréaliste de l'objet*. He quoted Dali, who had previously argued that 'une image double' (i.e. an object with a hidden meaning) was 'la représentation d'un objet qui, sans la moindre modification figurative ou anatomique, soit en même temps la représentation d'un autre objet absolument différent, dénuée elle aussi de tout genre de déformation ou anormalité qui pourrait déceler quelque arrangement'.<sup>17</sup> Breton then proposed a reciprocal connection between inner subjectivity and outer surface meaning and suggested imbuing an object with a symbolic value which would subsequently defamiliarise it. With the surface meaning stripped away, the object's poetic dimension could be harnessed and integrated into the narrative to provide a chain of object-associations, requiring only 'l'imagination amoureuse de chacun'<sup>18</sup> to deconstruct and interpret the new meanings.

A final potentially illuminating interface between Surrealism and the importance of the object in poetic realism was the influence of Jacques Prévert. Prévert had flirted briefly with the Surrealists in the mid-1920s before breaking away and joining *Le Groupe Octobre* in 1932, and his lyrical brand of surrealism infiltrates his 1930s

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<sup>16</sup> Blakeway, p. 29. She suggests that the Surrealist preoccupation between beautiful and banal juxtapositions dates back to Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, thus reinforcing the Romantic poetic tradition of seeing objects as transcendent symbols of a higher reality.

<sup>17</sup> André Breton, 'Situation surréaliste de l'objet', in *Oeuvres complètes, vol. II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), pp. 472-96 (p. 491).

<sup>18</sup> Breton, p. 494.

cinematic collaborations with Carné and Trauner. This is achieved most explicitly through the way in which different emotions and aspects of individual lives can be represented through objects and the often illogical associations encapsulated within them. Prévert's sensitivity to the poetic consciousness of objects resonates throughout his collaborations with Carné: a recurring image in *Drôle de drame* is hundreds of empty milk bottles, and in *Les Visiteurs du soir*, a smashed vase of flowers transforms into a knot of writhing snakes. When Diego (Yves Montand) and Malou (Natalie Nattier) dance together in the workshop in *Les Portes de la nuit* amidst alabaster plaster casts and one-armed sculptures, Prévert seemed to be integrating a de Chirico-style surrealism with Carné-Trauner poetry. This use of mannequins in claustrophobic spaces was a clear link back to de Chirico and Carrà's 'Pittura Metafisica' movement of the early 1910s, which, in an early precursor to Surrealism, used disconnected and mysterious images to forge new, often magical atmospheres. Like de Chirico and the early Surrealists, Prévert's sensitivity to the poetic consciousness of objects resonates throughout his film work, which in turn stems from his literary output. Certainly his poem 'Inventaire' (published in *Paroles* in 1945), which on the surface seems to be a playful account of a department store stock-take, is inflected with the kind of object associations and juxtapositions that characterise *Le Quai des brumes*, *Les Enfants du paradis*, and most successfully, *Le Jour se lève*. In the poem, 'un talon Louis XV', 'un fauteuil Louis XVI' and 'un buffet Henri II' are interspersed with 'deux pommes à l'anglaise', 'une pierre' and 'un siphon d'eau de Seltz'.<sup>19</sup> Through this intermingling, the reader is forced to re-evaluate the objects, realising that their surface appearance has now been altered due

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Prévert, 'Inventaire', in *Anthologie Prévert*, ed. by Christiane Mortelner (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 62-3.

to the placing of the objects in random order. It is this kind of object-association that best typifies the Carné-Prévert-Trauner collaborations and may in part explain the relative commercial and critical failure of *Hôtel du Nord* (1938). Ginette Vincendeau has argued that the film is more indebted to 'theatrical realism' rather than 'poetic realism'<sup>20</sup>, and this may be attributed to the lack of scenes in the film in which quotidian objects are imbued with emblematic qualities. Although screenwriter Henri Jeanson adds a level of pessimistic fatalism that characterises poetic realist narratives, the only recurring motif is the gun, thrown in the bushes after Pierre (Jean-Pierre Aumont) has used it to shoot Renée (Annabella), retrieved by Edmond (Louis Jouvet) and then relinquished to Nazarède (Henri Bosc) in the final scene. Consequently, the poetic object-associations typical of Prévert's work are lost, and the film relies more on fragments of decor (the recurring motif of the bridge) rather than objects to underpin the narrative themes.<sup>21</sup> If poetic realism relies on this symbiosis between objects and an inherent transcendent power, then Vincendeau's self-termed 'theatrical realism' highlights how theatricality and theatrical conventions can never really sustain extensive object-associations because as a theatre audience we are never close enough to an object to appreciate its symbolic power, nor are we directed by camera movement, editing or foregrounding to concentrate on a certain fragment within the totality of the *mise en scène*.

Objects in both Surrealism and the cinema seem to corroborate thematic concerns that dialogue might not always be able to render. This assertion goes some way to prove that poetic realism in its most compressed form is the emitting of symbolic

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<sup>20</sup> Ginette Vincendeau, '*Hôtel du Nord*', *Sight and Sound*, 3 (1999), pp. 41-2 (p. 42).

<sup>21</sup> In his autobiography, Carné dismissed Jeanson's prose style as 'creux et plat' yet any screenwriter that can come up with the memorable lines 'Atmosphère, atmosphère' (which as I write this is listed as the most popular film quote on the website [www.allocine.fr](http://www.allocine.fr)) cannot be so summarily dismissed. (Marcel Carné, *La Vie à belles dents* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1989), p. 93).

values from selected elements of the *mise en scène* (lighting, decor, framing) which does not distort the reality effect that these elements simultaneously impose. If Surrealism encouraged the explicit rejection of realism and the move to confront reality on a more imaginative level, then we can see where the symbiosis between Surrealism and poetic realism begins to emerge.

### **Bazin's experiment and *Le Jour se lève***

Aragon also argued that like children who endlessly repeat a word and thus strip it of its conventional meaning, cinema had the capacity to transform conventional representations of reality, strip away its purpose and effect a more poetic resonance: 'De même à l'écran se transforment au point d'endosser de menaçantes ou énigmatiques significations ces objets qui, tout à l'heure, étaient des meubles ou des carnets à souches.'<sup>22</sup> In his seminal article on the confluence of decor, objects and narrative in *Le Jour se lève*, André Bazin argued that poetic realist cinema attempted to accomplish a similar transposition. Examining the way in which certain privileged elements of the decor acquire a narrative function, Bazin conducted an interesting experiment on the audience who had just watched the film, asking them to note down all the props, furniture and other paraphernalia in François's apartment. The responses were fairly typical: of the furniture, the audience remembered the bed, table, mirror, wardrobe and chair; of the *objets divers*, they recalled the football, the brooch, the revolver and the teddy bear, as well as the ashtray, cigarettes, alarm clock, photographs and the postcards around the mirror. However, several items were ignored by all those questioned: a small chest-of-drawers, a lunch-pack and

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<sup>22</sup> Aragon, 'Du Décor', p. 9.

bicycle parts. Bazin's conclusion was that these latter objects were the only 'à n'avoir à aucun moment de fonction dramatique'.<sup>23</sup> By not actively participating in the narrative, their performativity had been greatly curtailed. Unlike, for example, the luminescent glass of milk in *Suspicion* (1941) or the key in *Once Upon A Time In America* (1984), these decor fragments had been stripped of any dramatic, and therefore psychological, importance. The props and furniture that were remembered by the audience had been foregrounded and dramatised in the course of the narrative - the football was a sign of François's love of sport, the photographs on the wall symbolised a lost past and the wardrobe served a metaphorical function by acting as a barricade against the rest of society.

There is just the desired amount of object associations in François's room; any less, and the remaining items seem isolated, cut adrift from the film's epistemic flow; any more, and the possibility of ambiguity and heavy symbolism (Tashiro's 'static') multiplies as the accumulation of objects becomes less an exercise in expressing character or revealing the narrative than a formal appreciation of the image as an image, something to be watched rather than participated in.

Unlike the objects in German Expressionism, which would generally have been integrated into an explicitly stylised and distorted *mise en scène*, the objects and props in *Le Jour se lève*, and by extension, poetic realism, were anchored to a recognisably orthodox reality. Bazin argued that the authenticity of the decor constituted 'un étonnant documentaire social'<sup>24</sup> and Andrew esteems Trauner's decor as 'absolutely authentic to the period, class, and location the film is trying to

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<sup>23</sup> André Bazin, *Le Cinéma français de la Libération à la Nouvelle Vague (1945-1958)*, comp. Jean Narboni (Paris: Petite Bibliothèque des Cahiers du cinéma, 1998), p. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Bazin, *Le Cinéma français*, p. 93.

represent'.<sup>25</sup> Attuned to an object's extra-narrative function, Trauner achieved optimal saturation, allowing carefully selected objects and decor to contribute most to the overall meaning of the film without drawing attention away from the underlying narrative imperatives. Yet Trauner was also careful to balance the symbolic with the authentic, and in *Le Jour se lève*, this symbolic function of the objects and decor worked precisely because the myriad of meanings and possible associations had been first structured and modulated by a verisimilitudinous design scheme. As with action spaces discussed in chapter 6, the fundamental choice is again one between functionalism and stylisation. Should the object pass unnoticed or should it determine the look and mood of the film? Trauner was particularly skilled at balancing function and style in the decor, creating first a realistic built environment and then stylising it through simplification. There is an identical process with objects - introducing them into the frame as decorative props and employing them as extra-narrative tokens if required. This is ultimately what Aragon suggested in his article; that film decor is firstly introduced as a functional, even banal part of the greater design scheme, but is then transformed into a symbolic amplifier of the narrative.

### **The *punctum* and the *studium*: Barthes's principles of photography**

In his article, Aragon also argued how the spectator had become riveted by those American films that 'haussent au dramatique une banknote sur laquelle se concentre l'attention, une table ou repose un revolver [...] un mouchoir révélateur d'un

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<sup>25</sup> Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 187.

crime'.<sup>26</sup> This pronounced readiness of an object to appropriate the spectator's attention amidst the overall *mise en scène* be linked to what Roland Barthes, in his discussion of the duality inherent in still photography, referred to as the *punctum*. Barthes argues that two elements co-exist in a photograph, the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* is a term for the interest which we show in a photograph, our desire to understand and study what the meanings are in the image and how we explore the relationship between the meanings and our subjectivities. Broadly speaking, it is the general landscape of the photograph: where it is taken, who is in it, what the weather is like. It is the overall image placed before us, sometimes bland, sometimes interesting, always dependent upon an individual appreciation. In contrast, the *punctum* refers to the sudden recognition of an unexpected meaning; those objects or details that grab our attention and transform the way in which the photograph is to be viewed:

Le second élément vient casser (ou scander) le *studium* [...] Un mot existe en latin pour désigner cette blessure, cette piqûre, cette marque faite par un instrument pointu; ce mot m'irait d'autant mieux qu'il renvoie aussi à l'idée de ponctuation et que les photos dont je parle sont en effet comme ponctuées, parfois même mouchetées, de ces points sensibles, précisément ces marques, ces blessures sont des points. Ce second élément qui vient déranger le *studium*, je l'appellerai donc *punctum*; car *punctum*, c'est aussi: piqûre, petit trou, petite tache, petite coupure - et aussi coup de dés. Le *punctum* d'une photo, c'est ce hasard qui, en elle, *me point* (mais aussi me meurtrit, me poigne).<sup>27</sup>

Susan Smith has argued that Hitchcock's films operate on this tension between the *studium* and the *punctum*, 'between the general and the specific, the far and the near, the public and the private'.<sup>28</sup> This statement is important because it underlines the way in which cinematic objects are constantly 'there' but are often ignored or

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<sup>26</sup> Aragon, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes, 'La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie' in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. III (1974-1980), ed. and comp. by Eric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 1995), pp. 1111-200 (p. 1126).

<sup>28</sup> Susan Smith, *Hitchcock: Suspense, Humour and Tone* (London: BFI, 2000), p. 96.



detracted from by other elements within the frame. Although such a reaction is not as possible in the cinema as it is in photography (as film does not allow us to close our eyes and consider the image because it will not be there when we open them), we may still recognise the power of that ‘peripheral, unlaboured incidental that nevertheless distracts the spectator’s attention from an image’s promoted “meaning”’.<sup>29</sup> Renoir and Carné’s camera is frequently so contemplative at key points in the narrative (most notably in establishing shots or scenes wherein objects play a fundamental part) that the spectator has time to examine the frame and then recognise the objects. In this respect, the *punctum* is comparable to the action space; both are often inconsequential and unassuming, but they nonetheless serve a crucial purpose in the construction and continuation of the illusion of a real space. Whether as ephemeral as a trail of cigarette smoke, or as concrete as the black circle around Arizona on the map of American on Lange’s bedroom wall, these cinematic *puncta* serve to draw attention to themselves within the clutter of the frame, thereby increasing their narrative significance.

Where Barthes’s theory may be at odds with the poetic realist design scheme is that for Barthes, the banal objects in the photograph act as ‘un supplément: c’est ce que j’ajoute à la photo et *qui cependant y est déjà*’.<sup>30</sup> The *punctum* was effectively already there in the image - it was not added by a designer or made more or less prominent by a camera technique or angle. However, the theory is a useful one in trying to account for the importance of small details in the frame. The spectator will dwell on the *studium* and is then suddenly drawn to the *punctum*.

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<sup>29</sup> Gilbert Adair, *Flickers: An Illustrated Celebration of 100 Years of Cinema* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 85.

<sup>30</sup> Barthes, p. 1147. Having just seen *Le Fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulain* (2001) as I write this, I recall Amélie’s predilection for going to the cinema and noticing objects in the frame that no-one else sees, like the fly behind the embracing couple. It is there, but only when she points it out do we see it.

## Foregrounding the object

In his article, Aragon refers to the way in which attention to an object can be intensified. The film-maker could 'restreindre à volonté le champ objectif pour intensifier l'expression' or 'haussent au dramatique [...] sur laquelle se concentre l'attention'. Objects frequently presented on screen are not important *per se*; it is how they are presented that imbues them with power. Directors and designers were comparable to those nineteenth-century novelists who were less concerned with the accumulation of incidental detail than with drawing the reader's attention to objects which were important in the lives of their characters. Like novelists, a film-maker may employ a variety of techniques to capture, explore and 'open out' the diegetic space, to foreground cinematic objects and imbue them with a narrative significance.

Recalling Schopenhauer's theory of aesthetics, Sitney notes that:

[E]very modification, even the slightest, which an object receives through its position, foreshortening, concealment, distance, distribution of light and shade, linear and atmospheric perspective, and so on, is unerringly given through its effect on the eye, and is accurately taken into account.<sup>31</sup>

If 1930s poetic realist cinema relies upon a symbiosis between objects and an inherent transcendent power, then specific cinematic techniques are required to maintain the extensive emanation of object-associations. Several of these methods may momentarily arrest the narrative flow by deliberately exploiting their own formal qualities, but they are crucial in aligning the audience to the narrative concerns.

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<sup>31</sup> P. Adams Sitney, 'Landscape in the Cinema: the rhythms of the world and the cinema', in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, ed. by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 103-26 (p. 106).

If Aragon is referring to one cinematic technique in particular, it is the close-up. Close-ups could not only impose a sense of order on audience perception of the objects in the frame by concentrating on the pertinent rather than the extraneous, but they were also espoused by early critics and film-makers as the most effective method for capturing the hidden poetry of everyday objects; for Epstein, the technique represented 'l'âme du cinéma'.<sup>32</sup> Béla Balázs understood how the close-up had widened and deepened our vision of life, coining the term 'microphysiognomy' to refer explicitly to extreme close-ups of human faces epitomised by those of Renée Jeanne Falconetti in Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928). In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Walter Benjamin had proclaimed film as the liberation of perception, and argued that close-ups of objects could extend 'our comprehensions of the necessities of our lives' and assure us 'of an immense and unexpected field of action'.<sup>33</sup> One of the revolutionary developments in *Un Chien andalou* was the proliferation of extreme close-ups on isolated images (ants crawling on a hand, a razor blade on an eye-ball). To paraphrase Vertov, Buñuel's camera was in constant movement, approaching and drawing away from objects and crawling under them. He used the close-up to disorient the audience and force them to reassess the importance of the isolated image. The close-up was employed to extrapolate the hidden power of objects, which not only embodied a humanist preoccupation with detail (which would be explored by Renoir) but also privileged the relationship to and power over the human protagonist (which Carné would come to rely on). If close-ups are pictures expressing the poetic sensibility of the director, then their deployment in poetic

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<sup>32</sup> Jean Epstein, *Bonjour Cinéma* (Paris: La Sirène, 1921), p. 94.

<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 4th edn, ed. by Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 665-81 (p. 677).

realist cinema is crucial in creating a sense of the lyrical and transcendental power of the inanimate object.

In poetic realism, the close-up became a way of extrapolating the hidden power of objects. In *La Nuit de carrefour*, a close-up of two bottles of poisoned beer slipped through a window and a recurring close-up of a paper knife in both *La Chienne* and *La Bête humaine* clearly indicates to the audience that these objects are intended murder weapons. In all three cases, the technique invests the object with a hallucinatory power.

Other techniques could also be employed to reinforce the primacy of the object. In chapter 4, Carné was designated a closed film-maker because of his austere exploration of narrative space through slow, steady camera movements. Another aspect of closed film-making is a desire to get to the heart of things and find connections and associations embedded within the *mise en scène*. Controlled editing techniques, such as a constant succession of short shots, can imbue the object with extra narrative weight and further articulate the closed style. In the final scene of *Le Jour se lève*, Carné presents a medium close-up of François sitting on his bed, looking at the gun on the mantelpiece, off screen. There is then an alternation between the shots of François on the bed with two shots of the gun on the mantelpiece; the first is a medium close-up, the second an extreme close-up, as if the decrease in spatio-temporal distance between the two shots signifies François's increasing sense of his own destiny. Through this rhythmic editing and alternation between off-screen and on-screen presentation of the object, the object's own importance is accentuated, as is the narrative closure.

A contrasting, though no less revealing, technique is used in *L'Alibi*, where a repetition of narrow shots and reverse shots builds narrative tension and reinforces

character perception. After Commissaire Calas (Louis Jouvet) has informed Hélène (Jany Holt) that the man for whom she has been providing an alibi will in fact be investigated for murder, she leaves his office and stands dumb-founded in the corridor, her hand hovering on the door handle. There then follows four shots: a close-up of Jouvet's face watching the door handle, a shot of the handle beginning to turn, a reverse-shot of Jouvet, waiting to see if Holt will re-enter and confess and then a close-up of the handle ceasing to turn. Through this systematic approach, the plot dynamics and tensions are further corroborated, with Jouvet as the skilled manipulator and Holt as the false alibi faced with a crisis of conflict.

An object's incandescent quality may also be exploited to make it stand out from the rest of the decor. In 1926, Fernand Léger wrote that a transparent object can 'remain immobile, and light will give it movement [...] Light is everything. It transforms an object completely. It becomes an independent personality'.<sup>34</sup> Even as mundane an object as a saucepan, Léger argued, can be transformed into a powerful emotional signifier through its interplay with light. In *La Bête humaine*, Renoir achieves this kind of narrative focus through a defined lighting effect - the sliver of light that slices through the train carriage windows imitates Roubaud's blade streaking down the corridor towards the camera during the Grandmorin murder scene.

In *La Grande illusion*, the tracking shot is an important device in pacing out the individual dramaturgical spaces of the film and focusing more closely on specific design fragments. In a thirty-second sequence, several objects are foregrounded which reflect and reinforce von Rauffenstein's personality, underlining the way in

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<sup>34</sup> Fernand Léger, 'A New Realism - The Object', in *Introduction to the Art of the Movies*, ed. by Lewis Jacobs (New York: Octagon, 1970), pp. 96-8 (pp. 97-8).

which camera movements are integral parts of revealing not just open spaces but character and personality enclosed in tight spaces. The scene is as crucial a confluence between object and personality as François's room in *Le Jour se lève*. As this space features only three times in the narrative (it reappears later on when von Rauffenstein (Erich von Stroheim) tells Boïeldieu (Pierre Fresnay) about his war injuries and is the room where Boïeldieu dies), it is perhaps understandable that it has not been studied in such detail. Whereas François's *huis clos* was the very essence of the film, von Rauffenstein's private space does not play any narrative role other than it simply being there. Yet what it contains is as important a revealing of character as François's decor fragments.

After a documentary-style sequence of a train passing through the German countryside, the camera frames a sign - 'Wintersborn Internment Camp', then dissolves to a shot of the fortress high up on a mountain-side. From the shot of the fortress there is a dissolve to von Rauffenstein's room and a track along one side of the room. The objects revealed are: a huge crucifix with a carved statue of Christ; a framed picture of Wilhelm II; a potted geranium; a champagne bottle; Casanova's memoirs; a gold watch; a framed picture of his mother; a pair of binoculars; swords; white gloves; perfume dispenser. All these objects are perfect crystallisations of von Rauffenstein's mien and personality, conforming to Mallet-Stevens's dictum that decor 'doit présenter le personnage avant même que celui-ci ait paru'.<sup>35</sup> By eschewing traditional methods of character introduction (dialogue or voice-over), the above signifiers facilitate an intersection between object and person. The framed pictures indicate a devotion to duty, both personal and professional, the champagne bottle, white gloves and perfume hint at wealth, bourgeois values and even a certain

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<sup>35</sup> In Léon Barsacq, *Le Décor de film* (Paris: Seghers, 1970), p. 104.

flair. The military equipment corroborates von Rauffenstein's position of authority, while perhaps most significantly, the geranium signifies a beauty, both fragile and transient, whose re-appearance after Boïeldieu's death hints at a transcendence hitherto unexplored in Renoir's work.

Directors instinctively foreground the small details in the frame, either by placing the object where it has maximum visual impact, or by dwelling on it for an instant before the camera continues tracking or panning. Orson Welles once suggested that '[i]n the theatre there are 1,500 cameras rolling at the same time - in the cinema there is only one'<sup>36</sup> and this is true of the cinematic fetishisation of objects. Whereas a theatre audience will have a multitude of sights and sounds to take in at one sitting (and thus the power of the foregrounded object may be lost or hidden), the cinema spectator is guided to the object through an intricate interplay of camera movement, careful positioning of the detail and a rhythmic lingering for a second or more.

### **Object associations: a typology**

L'utilisation du symbole au cinéma consiste à parcourir à une image capable de suggérer au spectateur plus que ne peut lui fournir la simple perception du contenu apparent. On pourrait en effet à propos de l'image filmique parler d'un *contenu latent* et d'un *contenu apparent*.<sup>37</sup>

In order to try and understand the ways in which objects participate in filmic narrative, I propose the following typology. Using a sequence of three overlapping circles, I will show how, through an ever-increasing intersection of these affective circles, the importance and impact of these objects are presented on screen.

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<sup>36</sup> 'Orson Welles talking to Juan Cobos, Miguel Rubio and José Antonio Pruneda, 1965', in *Hollywood Voices - Interviews with Film Directors*, ed. by Andrew Sarris (London: Secker and Warburg, 1967), pp. 149-80 (p. 163).

<sup>37</sup> Marcel Martin, *Le Langage cinématographique* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1955), p. 87.

Regardless of whether the film-maker has foregrounded an object in such a way for it to 'symbolise' something specific (or whether the over-anxious spectator seeks to foist 'meaning' onto the most prosaic of objects), it is clear that objects and decor fragments resonate with a suggestiveness, providing a deeper exploration of a film's subtext.

The object in 1930s poetic realism constitutes one of those ostensibly peripheral details with which one finds oneself just as fascinated as with any of the film's characters, and this typology seeks to understand the way in which objects impact on the narrative and corroborate thematic concerns. The categories are: decorative, functional and symbolic.

All cinematic objects are decorative fragments before they are imbued with any symbolic or emblematic value because they reinforce the reality effect, rooting the narrative in a verisimilitudinous context. Despite Batala's faults in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, he certainly recognises the importance of the carefully placed object. When he tells an illustrator for *Javert* to add a sink into the corner of the room, he claims that his readers like 'ces petits détails'. Cinematic objects will always to some extent be decorative since they contribute to a certain atmosphere - it is the degree to which they are decorative which privileges not only the object itself but also the overall mood of the *mise en scène*.

In 1930s French cinema, images are full of residual detail; decorative elements which provide a surface authenticity and a palpable sense of the real world. In *Le Quai des brumes*, Zabel's trinket shop is full of paraphernalia and mementoes. Behind the counter are chessboards, yachts, postcards and shell-encrusted boxes, all serving a decorative purpose. In most cases, the decor is representative of the sociological average. The typicality of a working-class room of the 1930s is denoted



through the recurrence of common motifs - clothes, furniture and sparse decor - and through this verisimilitudinous decor, certain key objects or decor fragments can be stylised and enhanced to convey further information about the characters or establish mood and atmosphere. Although poetic realism is constantly attempting to reveal the secret heart of things, an object's initial role must always be that of a decorative icon, an inherent part of the set that only begins to emit symbolic values after its mimetic function has been established.

All objects by their very nature are functional for they all perform some sort of task, and yet frequently in poetic realism, the very appearance of a certain object suppresses that object's innate function in favour of a symbolic or signifying role so as to participate in the drama in a different way than originally intended. As we have already observed, the conclusions of his experiment on the audience of *Le Jour se lève* was indicative of the innate functionalism of objects - as with the decorative category, excessive object or decor symbolism must not be allowed to overshadow or undermine verisimilitude. A condensation of meaning around key components of the decor undoubtedly amplifies a film's poetic dimension, but the object's function is the first stage in establishing any *effet du réel*. The spectators remembered the alarm clock because it rings at the end of the film, the mirror because it is smashed and the teddy bear because it falls off the mantelpiece. These objects are all imbued with heavy symbolic resonances, but only after they have been subtly integrated into the diegesis as key functioning props. This is the abiding legacy of Bazin's experiment, for as much as being an examination of Carné's strict interdependence of form and content, his deconstruction of the film shows that symbolism can only proceed out of functionalism.

An object can be said to become symbolic only once the decorative and the functional have fused. By outstripping the function for which they were originally designed, by acquiring 'a set of quotation marks'<sup>38</sup>, cinematic objects can be invested with metaphorical dimensions which privilege them within the diegesis.

In *L'Alibi*, recurrent images of magical symbols, pentagrams, a skull and a cast of dismembered hands in Winkler's office reveal with economic clarity his profession (a professional hypnotist) and serve to reinforce the darker, more mysterious side of his personality. Although the audience is primed of his guilt from the outset, the props corroborate the initial impressions of him. When Catherine (Michèle Morgan) asks Kerlo (Fernand Ledoux) to return the star-fish to André (Gabin) at the end of *Remorques*, she is returning an object that had previously symbolised the melancholy inherent in their illicit affair. The transferral back to the original owner lends a satisfying cyclical closure to the narrative but also privileges the star-fish as an emblem which figuratively encapsulates the end of an affair.

The brooch in *Le Jour se lève* is a reminder of François's love for Françoise and is a token of his subsequent disappointment. It is clearly visible on the mantelpiece after François has killed Valentin, and then appears in the flashback narrative for the first time when Françoise pricks her finger while she tries to put it on. In the second flashback narrative it has assumed a greater narrative significance as Françoise has given it to François as a sign of her affection for him, although the object's joyful connotations are undermined in a later scene when Clara informs that the brooch was given to Françoise by Valentin (Jules Berry) as a prize for having slept with him. In the narrative present, he throws the brooch out of the window, a defiantly symbolic gesture. By this point, the brooch, which at the outset had a purely metonymic

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<sup>38</sup> Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), p. 8.

relation to the plot (standing for Françoise's innocence) has gradually been invested with an emblematic meaning - the brooch is thrown out of the window when François no longer believes her. The use of the brooch to control our alignment with characters highlights how the transferring of a certain object from person to person throughout the narrative can underpin power relations or engineer audience sympathy.

The teddy bear also possesses talismanic powers - it anthropomorphises into François through its connection with the 'sad eye' and 'happy eye', and serves an important proleptic purpose after it is the first object to be shot down off the mantelpiece when the police fire through the window. By mirroring the fatalistic elements of the *mise en scène*, the teddy bear becomes a personal fetish for François, and because of this, there is a difference between the teddy bear and the brooch - the latter in the film endowed with a meaning given it by the donor or recipient.

In the Cabinet of Curiosities scene in *L'Atalante*, the object is codified as an extension of its owner's past. Stealing into *le père Jules*'s cabin, Juliette (Dita Parlo) gazes in wonder at the many mementoes: erotic photographs, a mannequin, hats, a swordfish bone, a fan, an elephant tusk, music boxes. All these objects vie for attention in this scene, and through a combination of close-ups and slow zooms, the objects are poeticised and their superficial meaning stripped away. They all constitute elements from *le père Jules*'s past: the elephant tusk was a hunting trophy from Africa, the fan from Shanghai, the mannequin from Caracas. When Juliette discovers a jar containing a pair of severed hands, *le père Jules* (Michel Simon) tells her that the hands are his only memory of a lost friend. Here the gruesomeness of the discovery is juxtaposed to the object's implications of intimacy and melancholy. When *le père Jules* steals a gramophone horn from a Parisian café, the next jigsaw

piece of his personal history puzzle has been completed. His final exhibit is his tattooed body, itself a highly readable text in which personal body adornment becomes the most intimate way of revealing character. Throughout this brief episode, objects are seen not just as extensions of the owner, but they are the means of telling a story, of narrativising design. This notion is made explicit in the next scene, when Jean (Jean Dasté) enters the cabin and starts throwing objects around and breaking them. Motivated perhaps out of jealousy (he has presumably never been privy to such revelations) and a desire to reassert masculine authority over both his wife and the ship's mate, Jean's act of aggression is an attempt to prevent the object telling a story and having a hold over his wife.

Flowers are a crucial intersection between the decorative, the functional and the symbolic. They are initially decorative signifiers (literally 'dressing' the scene, adding light, tone and texture), and through the mediating device of functionalism can transform into emblems of a wider narrative concern. There is a frequent development from the flower-as-decorative-item to the flower being imbued with a symbolic charge. In *Le Jour se lève*, flowers adhere to this progression: Françoise first meets François when he asks him for directions to Mme. Legardier's house to deliver the lilacs. They have initially been introduced to fulfil a decorative role, but simultaneously function as the way of introducing François to Françoise. When the flowers wither in the sand-blasting workshop, the symbolism can be read in several ways: the debilitating effect of this environment, the fragility of beauty, a proleptic reminder of the couple's fate, and the transience of their relationship.

Another intersection between the decorative, functional and symbolic is in furniture. It is difficult to agree with Tashiro's claim that 'film furniture is rarely

used as anything other than a passive backdrop to events.’<sup>39</sup> He argues that real furniture may contribute to an over-arching architectural and aesthetic effect (‘that chair looks better by the window’, ‘that desk takes up too much space’) but film furniture is nearly always used as a kind of ‘space filler’. Yet like objects, furniture is equally fundamental in propping up the narrative and reflecting the taste, mentality and overall mood of a particular time or place. Jacques Feyder’s *Gribiche* (1925) was dominated by Meerson’s overwhelming *arts décoratif* set design which encompasses every section of the design process. That even the bathroom fittings get a special mention in the credits is testament to the notion that furniture has been inserted not just to showcase prevailing modernist aesthetics but also to function as narrative amplifier.

Unlike a small object, furniture is less portable, reducing its capacity to reappear throughout the narrative in a variety of different settings. Yet furniture, however static, can still serve the narrative through a system of connection and comparison. To compare the furniture and interior design of two different rooms is to observe the reflection of the characters’ personal taste and economic status. In *Le Quai des brumes*, Zabel’s room crowded with ornate furniture indicates claustrophobia and ostentation is itself a stark contrast to the small bare room in the Panama Bar which reflects the occupants’ mental and emotional states. As such, Tashiro’s conclusion that ‘where furniture figures prominently in the action [...] its participation is always negative and destructive’<sup>40</sup> becomes troublesome. Instead, it is necessary to recognise that furniture can function in precisely the opposite way. It is a further constructive segment in the fusion of decor, design and narrative, so that a simple

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<sup>39</sup> Charles Shiro Tashiro, *Pretty Pictures: Production Design and the History Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), p. 26.

<sup>40</sup> Tashiro, *Pretty Pictures*, p. 27.

chair becomes an extension of its occupier. Furniture is a 'space filler', but to fill the space requires a grasp not just of architecture and aesthetics but also an understanding of how far the furniture can be used in a sequence to underline rather than undermine the narrative flow.

Production designer Patricia Norris has argued that all rooms 'come out of people [...] and if you understand who the characters are, you understand how they live. Most decorating conveys what's not written and gives you a sense of the people'.<sup>41</sup> Furniture is the first tangible interface between the personal and the public in any given room. It becomes a signifier of personal taste and income and a continuation of the inhabitant. The imposition of highly distinctive wallpaper and curtains, for example, are testament to the efforts made to impose some element of individual taste onto even the most spartan architectural features. Through interpretation of the furniture, its positionality or the way a room has been dressed, the spectator can read the set. The placing of furniture within public and private spaces had already been theorised by Edgar Allan Poe in 1840, when, in his illuminating essay 'The Philosophy of Furniture', he reached the conclusion that it is the English who are the best at interior decoration. What is particularly incisive about the article is the deconstruction of the well-furnished apartment. He wrote that:

Very often the eye is offended by their inartistic arrangement. Straight lines are too prevalent [...] or clumsily interrupted at right angles. If curved lines occur, they are repeated into unpleasant uniformity. By undue precision, the appearance of many a fine apartment is utterly spoiled.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Patricia Norris, in Charles Drazin, *Blue Velvet* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 125.

<sup>42</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Furniture', in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Penguin, 1982), pp. 462-66 (p. 463).

Furniture should be placed against the wall, not cluttering up the room, which Poe saw as having characterised bourgeois nineteenth-century interior design. In what reads like an 1840s *feng shui* manifesto, he elucidated several key points which translate into 1930s film design. Marie Bell's stuffily over-elaborate salon in *Un Carnet de bal* or Mina Parely's *art décoratif*-inspired interiors in *La Règle du jeu* are both characterised by a proliferation of furniture and ephemera which threaten to block out any vestiges of human vitality. For Poe, the soul of the apartment is the carpet, but this important design fragment is frequently omitted by designers or obscured by the owners. Similarly, glass chandeliers 'may be cited as the quintessence of all that is false in taste or preposterous in folly.'<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps the most evocative object in this period is the cut-out figure of a train which dominates the *bal des cheminots* towards the end of *La Bête humaine*. As couples dance around and past it, Renoir's camera approaches the train, frames it momentarily and then moves on. The object seems to fuse together the decorative (its gold trim and perfect dimensions make it the centre piece of the room), the functional (the steam-train is the film subject matter) and the symbolic (the train emblematic of the forces consuming Lantier (Gabin), and its patent artificiality indicative of the joylessness of this scene which will lead to the murder of Séverine (Simone Simon) by Lantier). The object here is not crucial as an extra-narrative device or emblematic of character or class, but instead seems to sum up perfectly the atmosphere and underlying narrative concerns of the film.

In poetic realism, the object can frequently play almost as large a part as the actor's performance in conveying character, and this poetic synthesis between man and object that comes from looking at things differently and for long enough is

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<sup>43</sup> Poe, p. 464.

summed up by J. H. Matthews: 'Man cannot cut himself off from things, cannot refuse to respond to them. Things not only mark the limits of his universe, permanently restricting his activity; they demand his attention, with an urgency which cannot be denied.'<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate how objects can add a kind of 'extraliteral and paraphraseable'<sup>45</sup> meaning to a scene, and how the spectator can be directed by a camera movement, editing or foregrounding to concentrate on a certain object within the totality of the *mise en scène*.

Rudolf Arnheim noted a salient characteristic of Sternberg's cinema as 'the important part played by objects, inanimate things, which, by showing the effects of human actions or symbolically reflecting the human, became the most powerful means of cinematic expression'.<sup>46</sup> This saturating style greatly influenced Carné, whose own 'langage plastique' clearly derived from German Expressionist filmmakers such as Sternberg and Murnau. The transcendental power inherent in everyday objects finds strong resonances in Carné's poetic realist films. In all of his films, decor fragments and props become objective correlatives of the characters' states of minds: in *Jenny*, the train smoke was analogous with Françoise Rosay's foggy mental state, the industrial bleakness of Le Havre mirrored the protagonists' individual despair in *Le Quai des brumes* and the iron bridge in *Hôtel du Nord* added to the sense of entrapment. I would agree with Turk that the success of these 'half-

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<sup>44</sup> J. H. Matthews, 'Things in the Naturalist Novel', *French Studies*, 14 (1960), pp. 212-23 (p. 218).

<sup>45</sup> Braudy, p. 39.

<sup>46</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, 'Josef von Sternberg', *Scenario*, 2 (1934), pp. 61-8, repr. in *Sternberg*, ed. and trans. by Peter Baxter, (London: BFI, 1980), pp. 35-41 (p. 37).



articulated, half-veiled associations'<sup>47</sup> depends upon the viewer's own sensitivity; a large part of the aesthetic pleasure derived from poetic realist films lies in that crucial intersection between empathising with the characters, projecting oneself into the *mise en scène* and participating in the deciphering of the nexus of object-associations. Yet although implicit and explicit resonances reverberate throughout poetic realist narratives, one should be wary of trying to find hidden meanings or pregnant significance in quotidian settings. As Bazin warned in his discussion of objects in *Le Jour se lève*, a symbolic reading of the object should not be allowed to blur the sociological or psychological indices embedded within it.<sup>48</sup>

Poetic realism as a mode of address was dependent upon meticulously designed and constructed environments and was likewise reliant upon a reciprocal symbolism between protagonist, set and object which goes some way to justify the inauthenticity and artificiality of the *mise en scène*. Through a process of distillation and magnification, 1930s French film-makers were able to find the ultimate sublimation of the object, to reveal its inner soul by essentialising it to such an extent that its poetic potential substantially enhanced the diegesis.

They ensured that the spectator remained responsive at all times to the significance attached to background description, aware that their descriptions would 'déterminer et compléter' the protagonist. Objects and details in poetic realism are a necessary preliminary in maintaining the reality effect, and their evocation is crucial in sustaining audience involvement. Once the set of quotation marks have been stripped away, the object can then begin, like the action space or design fragment, to perform.

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<sup>47</sup> Edward Baron Turk, *Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 154.

<sup>48</sup> Bazin, pp. 93-6.

## Conclusion

There was one movie-making quirk that might be easily overlooked - but if you did you'd suffer many a headache later. And that was design the sets to fit the stars [...]. One side of Jean Arthur's face was much more attractive than the other; in fact, her 'bad' side made her look like a different person. Thus the sets had to be constructed so that Jean Arthur's 'entrances' showed only the 'good' side of her face. Otherwise, she'd be forced into cumbersome, unnatural crossings and turns to maneuver her 'good' side to the camera.<sup>1</sup>

I wouldn't go near those damn things, those sets. What would I do? People don't want me for those things. They swamp me.<sup>2</sup>

Doors! He's directing the doors! All he's interested in is the doors.<sup>3</sup>

These anecdotes all offer concluding insights into cinematic set design. Capra's reminiscences about the filming of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) reflect the significance of set design in being able to present the characters in the most effective and aesthetic light. The set has to be moulded around the star and characters are obliged to literally 'wear' the space. Similarly, Fairbanks's remarks on the decor for *Robin Hood* (1922) anticipate another key issue of the film set: namely, the constant interplay between the set as 'vedette' which becomes the prime focal point of the film and the set as passive backdrop, subservient to both story and character. However apocryphal the anecdote, one need only see publicity stills of the castle's great hall with its vast open spiral staircase and the sheer size of the sharply defined masonry walls to empathise with Fairbanks and wonder who (or what) really was to be the star of the show in Paramount's ground-breaking production. That the set cannot be competed with implies that its narrative function can outstrip simple functionalism, and rather than exist purely as backdrop or container of action, the set

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Capra, *The Name Above The Title* (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 263, p. 266.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Fairbanks on first seeing the set (a ninety-foot castle) in *Robin Hood* (1922), *Watching*, BBC2, 11 November 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Pickford observed by Herman G. Weinberg in Hans Dieter Schaal, *Learning from Hollywood: Architecture and Film* (Stuttgart and London: Axel Menges, 1996), p. 94. The film, *Rosita* (1923), was notorious for the frosty relationship between star Pickford and director Ernst Lubitsch.

can reflect key narrative themes and reveal character psychology. This is reflected in Pickford's alleged on-set tantrum, an episode which serves to reinforce the timeless cinematic struggle between actor and set; between substance and spectacle. Design fragments such as a door or bridge function as more than just residual details or architectural linking devices. They can embellish or punctuate the narrative flow, and through a controlled lighting effect or close-up, can function as powerful additions to the surface level of meaning. In all three cases, the built environment becomes a central concern to the creation of extra-narrative function, regulating the interaction between self and situation. From the outset, the decor is deemed to assume an active role in the narrative.

It may at first seem contrary to preface the conclusion to a thesis that has concentrated on the decor of 1930s French poetic realist cinema with diverting examples from contemporaneous Hollywood productions. However, the aforementioned anecdotes are intended to illustrate the universal tendencies of cinematic decor and set design. With an increasing reliance upon and subservience to the 'studio system', national cinemas employed the confining and controlling properties of the studio to offer accurate conceptualisations of rural landscapes and urban environments. Likewise, the equilibrium between star and set (Capra and Arthur), the problem of super-architectures (Fairbanks and a castle) and the foregrounding of decor fragments (Pickford and a door) are issues that have resonated throughout this study. Jean Gabin, the era's most defining screen presence, was consistently fetishised by controlled lighting effects and an expressive decor that was literally moulded around him. 1930s French cinema made as much use of architecturally imposing decors as Hollywood productions, with the possibility that 'set-as-spectacle' could overwhelm the subtleties and nuances of the

narrative. Likewise, poetic realism invariably foregrounded decor fragments to the extent that they became potent amplifiers of narrative concerns.

The aim of this study has been to elucidate the performative and narrativistic tendency of poetic realist set design. It has developed the broad thesis that decor can be employed as a kind of narrative short-hand to metonymically represent an indigenous 'French-ness' and metaphorically represent narrative themes and emotional states. This is achieved through the establishment of a contiguous action space that conforms to prevailing architectural and spatial logic which is then punctuated by a series of recognisable signifiers that anchor the audience to a specific time and place and underpin a denotative level of narrative meaning. Through this establishing trichotomy of recognition-authenticity-interaction, poetic realist decor can then assert a powerful visual presence, an 'imageability' which sears the audience's collective memory. I have also contended that cinematic backdrops are not just descriptive, but also need to be expressive. The expressiveness in poetic realist decor is manifested most starkly in the 'action spaces' of bridges, staircases and other design fragments. These architectural *puncta* add an extra layer of readability onto the set and allow extra-narrative concerns to be mapped onto the design scheme.

Poetic realist films are not hard to identify because their representational nature is accentuated in several ways: an expressionistic lighting design, oblique camera angles, and most notably, a stylised set design. Yet a grounding in verisimilitude permits even the most expressionistic film to be deemed realistic provided it conforms to existing social conventions of representation as well as inherent generic conventions. Thus anything goes, because as long as what is being shown to the

audience is deemed to be plausible, is deemed to be what the 'real' could be like in this space, then it is accepted as realistic.

The poetic realist set ultimately goes through a series of transmutations. It initially functions as a denotative construct, establishing notions of place through the insertion of recognisable visual signifiers and the presentation of orthodox architectural components. The set sought to awaken memories etched on the minds of the spectator, and then heighten them through a deliberate stylisation and intensification. Once established as a verisimilitudinous action space, the decor-narrative nexus is strengthened through the introduction of foregrounded objects and the accentuation of design fragments through controlled lighting, prominence in the frame and rhythmic recurrence. The set then becomes readable, to the extent that the narrative can be deciphered by examining the decor. The consequent narrativisation of the decor guarantees its prominence and marks it out as the visual focal point of the film.

In reading poetic realist set design in this way, my intention has not been to elide the inevitable distinctive styles of 1930s French cinema, or to deny the very different styles of film design and decor strategies of the period, but instead to evince a consistency of design that pervades a particular strand of 1930s French cinema and became its most consistent characteristic. By looking closely at the design schemes and approaches of Lazare Meerson and Alexandre Trauner, the study has suggested that poetic realist decor is a phenomenological experience that intensifies the understanding of place as settings for the activities that embody the individual and the wider community. Meerson and Trauner set new standards in set design by fusing together documentary sources, personal temperament and a suggestive approach to quotidian decor.

The study has tended to concentrate on their work for two inter-related reasons. Firstly, their work constitutes the most enduring films in poetic realism's corpus. 1930s French cinema is arguably bookended by *Sous les toits de Paris* and *Le Jour se lève*, two films which combine a reliance upon extensive research and a drive towards stylisation. They also act as backdrop for contrasting depictions of the working class - in 1930, despite the artificiality of the *carton-pâte*, they are bonded together by community and popular song; by 1939, they are symbolically shut up in an airless tomb and surrounded by broken fragments of a former existence. For the rest of 1930s design, films were caught in a forcefield, with magnetic centres at *La Kermesse héroïque* and *Le Quai des brumes*. The former employed forced perspective, trick photography and reduced-scale buildings but never sacrificed authenticity; the latter grappled with a preternaturally symbolic landscape, where every decor seemed imbued with a melancholy and a grimy reality.

Secondly, no other set designer can claim to have produced such memorably enduring decors. Some nearly join them. Jacques Krauss's Casbah was seen by many (including Calvino, Graham Greene and the *Casablanca* team) as the apotheosis of a certain type of French decor, combining local colour with personal intuition, but apart from the *guinguette* and hotel in *La Belle équipe*, Krauss never expanded on this 'décor-vedette'. Both Jean Castanier and Eugène Lourié produced expansive and highly readable sets for Renoir, but the director's ultimate rejection of accentuated reality and an accompanying fatalist decor saw him rely instead on the mutability of real-life locations. Other designers, like Andrejew and Bilinsky, produced important work which juxtaposed the crushing symbolism of Russian opera and theatre with visual opulence. Yet they, like the prolific Guy de Gastyne and Jacques Colombier, fashioned decors which were comparable with the kind that

typified Hollywood *before* Selznick sent out his memorandum - a little too polished and sure of their own production values, rather than the spontaneous and organic decor that typified Meerson and Trauner. That Trauner's career lasted well into his seventies is testament to his longevity and artistic acumen, but also his capacity to visualise narrative theme and show the human figure within the monumentality of the decor. To see the massive pyramid in Hawks's *The Land of the Pharaohs* or Jack Lemmon flip through his Rolodex in the cavernous office in *The Apartment* is to appreciate Trauner's ability to juxtapose the human and the built within a single shot.

Although this study has been predominantly concerned with the cinema of the 1930s, mention has been necessarily made of the design schemes and visual intensity of, amongst others, *Remorques*, *Les Enfants du paradis* and *Les Portes de la nuit*. As set designer for all three of these films, Alexandre Trauner's influence - which began in the early 1930s working alongside Meerson - is clearly visible in the decor of these films. In this respect, *Le Jour se lève* was not the final word in poetic realism as a narrativised set design, because poetic realist iconography still lingered in the early 1940s. The creation of privileged *loci* that characterises part of poetic realism's aesthetic and generic capabilities are still visible in Carné's *Les Visiteurs du soir*, *Les Enfants du paradis* and *Les Portes de la nuit*. Although by 1946 poetic realism had become citable to the point of cliché, Carné's post-*Le Jour se Lève* triumvirate still summoned up and then provided the final words on the spirit of poetic realism, evidenced by the recurrence of striking sets, reappearance of *monstres sacrés* Arletty, Jules Berry and Pierre Brasseur, and a dash of Prévertian surrealism ('Qu'est-ce qui se passe?' 'Rien. Une noyée'). During and after the war there was a shift towards a different *optique*, one defined by historical and fantastical

settings, excessive embellishment and a stubborn attachment to the studio that flew in the face of other contemporaneous film-making trends. The relative failure of *Les Portes de la nuit* to find favour with critics and audiences signals French film-making's definitive rupture with the dominant production values of the pre-war years. Yet while the film clearly marks the end of French cinema's golden years (its *quinze ans d'années trente*), a closer examination of the aesthetics of the set reveals it to be a key transitional work in European cinema, with Trauner's methodology informed not simply by the French poetic realist mode, but also anticipated American *film noir*. The slow abandonment of the studio system in France during the 1950s restricted the capacity for set designers to experiment and explore within the confines of the studio, and gradually the iconography of design began to dissipate. The pre-war studio aesthetic would remain largely dormant in French film-making practice until the emergence of the *cinéma du look* in the 1980s, when Trauner collaborated with Luc Besson on the set of *Subway* (1985). By referencing his own work in *Les Portes de la nuit*, Trauner was effectively revalorising 1930s-style set design in a modern aesthetic of the spectacular.

The general trend throughout the 1930s was one of collaboration. Carné's direction could not function without Prévert's words, or Jaubert's music or Trauner's sets, and as such, it was a confluence of various skills and experiences that enabled such a rich cinematic style to develop. The instability and fragmentation of the film industry during this period facilitated an increasing tendency towards collaborative work and this was ultimately reflected in the growth of creative teams such as the Carné-Prévert-Trauner-Schüfftan company. However, given the singularly memorable and monumental sets he created, can Trauner be legitimately considered as an *auteur*? He was involved in the film-making process from the earliest stages



of pre-production and his authorial imprint is clearly visible in those poetic realist films on which he worked. If Prévert's relationship with Carné was dialectic - the director's dark pessimism was offset by the screenwriter's memorably playful dialogue - then Trauner's relationship with Carné was symbiotic, given their proficiency in visualising *mise en scène* and constructing recognisable decor. The significance of set design to poetic realism is such that it is arguably easier to distinguish a film generically termed 'poetic realist' on the basis of the set designer than the director. Without wishing to detract from the overall influence of Carné or Renoir, it is certainly valid to assert that the expressivity, performativity and stylisation of the decor are the most consistently intrinsic qualities of poetic realism.

The contribution that this thesis attempts to make to studies of 1930s French cinema is threefold. Firstly, there is an attempt to account for the architectural specificity of poetic realist set design by contending that the decor relies upon proportion, character and harmony. These three criteria of film architecture demand that everything is subjected to architectural orthodoxy, that design must reflect the spirit of the age and the thought of the film-makers, and that both foreground and background are linked together to create a whole. There are primarily three types of set. The negative one, in which the setting distracts because of its size or blatant artificiality, the neutral one, in which the setting neither adds to nor detracts from the overall impact of the film, or the positive one, in which the set is the 'hero' of the film, reflecting and resonating the narrative without drawing attention to its plasticity or craftsmanship. The most successful set designs were those that were not noticed. It was only when design 'failed', when a set looked like a set, that the design drew attention to itself. So infrequently does that occur in poetic realism that the audience is never aware of the set. Instead, it is an organic companion piece to the narrative.

Secondly, I have proposed that poetic realist films allied highly personal interpretations with minute exteriors and an attention to detail that offered a strong sense of authenticity. Bazin's conclusions on the role of decor in film are crucial observations on the importance of set design and the limitations of theatre as a realistic mode of creating a space:

Sauf dans les films d'un genre spécial, merveilleux, fantastique, le décor cinématographique doit être réaliste et méticuleusement choisi. Il doit tendre à engager l'action dans un milieu qui en confirme la vraisemblance. Mais le décor ne saurait se borner à être un cadre décoratif. Le cinéma peut par le grossissement des objets, les mouvements de l'appareil, par le choix qu'il peut faire dans l'ensemble d'une scène, faire intervenir dans l'action elle-même tout le monde extérieur, tandis que le théâtre n'a comme ressource que le jeu de l'acteur et le dialogue; le cinéma doit traiter le décor en acteur de drame.<sup>4</sup>

By turning to Bazin, I am recognising the immense contribution he has made to the study of design in French cinema. His deconstruction of *Le Jour se lève* stands as a compulsive and compulsory approach to the problematics and specifics of set design, and I have attempted to follow his lead by exploring the interaction between form and content, the way decor can not only 'faire intervenir dans l'action' but also reflect and respond to narrative themes, and the way a meticulously planned design scheme can function as short-hand for an entire narrative.

Thirdly, I have explored the cinematic imageability of Paris. When Richard Day, art director for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), overheard the following comment at a screening of the film: 'This show isn't phony. That was shot right down in New Orleans. I know the town'<sup>5</sup>, he realised his function as a set designer had been fulfilled. In fact, eighty per cent of the film had been shot on one studio set.

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<sup>4</sup> André Bazin, *Le Cinéma français de la Libération à la Nouvelle Vague (1945-1958)*, comp. Jean Narboni (Paris: Petite Bibliothèque des Cahiers du cinéma, 1998), p. 113.

<sup>5</sup> In Beverly Heisner, *Hollywood Art: Art Direction in the Days of the Great Studios* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 1990), p. 37.

Similarly, the cinematic Paris of the 1930s is often more like Paris than we remember, despite it merely being a constructed artifice on a Joinville or Billancourt backlot. Cinema is ultimately based upon the sustaining of a perfectly-formed illusion. Through a synthesis of documentation, pictorial importing and highly recognisable visual signifiers, the basic shell of the set assumes something at once more real than real but clearly rooted in a specific time and place. Poetic realist decor was a palimpsest, a manuscript that had been written on but with the earlier writing still legible. The decor supplied the audience with 'a *déjà vu* that inspired familiarity rather than contempt'<sup>6</sup> - the decor was already a reconfiguration of a pre-existing space that had gone through several rewrites. Occasional trace elements would be left - a 'Dubonnet sign' or a cobbled street - which were then densely layered with personal interpretations and additive architectural features. This explains why, for many people, the Paris of *Les Enfants du paradis* is Paris, and why so many are disappointed when they go and track down the 'real' Hôtel du Nord. It is this seamless interchange between actual and invented that helps to sustain the illusion of place.

What I hope this study has illustrated is that as a sub-section of architecture in which environments are rarely constructed in their entirety nor built to last, set design requires an immediacy both in visual impact and appeal to popular memory. Raymond Durgnat once wrote that film architecture can 'constitute an X-ray photograph of the heroes' minds'<sup>7</sup>; in other words landscape is analogous to states of mind and soul. Indeed, the importance of locale in film criticism has become an increasingly useful way in deconstructing and interpreting complex narrative themes.

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Corliss and Carlos Clarens, 'Designed for Film: The Hollywood Art Director', *Film Comment*, vol. 14:3 (1978), pp. 27-58 (p. 27).

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Durgnat, *Films and Feelings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 102.

Whether this is through the travelogue style of Woody Allen, whose focus on certain key New York *loci* inscribes the city's architecture with troubled romance and neurosis, through Hitchcock's use of architecture and landmarks (Mount Rushmore or The Royal Albert Hall) as a means of explicating hidden societal forces or Antonioni's use of mid-twentieth-century modern suburban domestic architecture as a medium of mystery, illusion and dislocation, the foregrounding of cinematic decor, whether built or real, monumental or liminal, verisimilitudinous or symbolic, is a profoundly experiential procedure. In poetic realism, the decor is the first interface with the narrative, and its success at combining the authentic with the stylised is crucial to its performativity. By working with other elements of the *mise en scène*, the decor can critique and qualify the dominant narrative trajectory and produce a fascinating dialogue with other elements of the discourse.

Cinema architecture is not simply concerned with *carton-pâte*, steel or wood, but is ultimately to do with creating an atmosphere. Through a combination of lighting, mood and composition, architecture can be freighted with decorative and symbolic weight to reflect the complete design of man's environment. Poetic realist set design was above all a rhetorical procedure 'permettant à l'imagination du spectateur de compléter mentalement ce que l'écran ne fait que lui suggérer'.<sup>8</sup> Decor should always be open to constant interpretation and individual appreciation, and the multitude of possible meanings embedded within the *mise en scène* characterised poetic realism as a highly 'readable' decor. Set design should never be about a 'set' design; rather than a fixed, immovable entity, it should be organic, in constant flux, remodelled for various experiences, both social and personal, public and private. It

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<sup>8</sup> François Albera, *Albatros: Des russes à Paris 1919-1929* (Milan: Mazzotta and Cinémathèque Française, 1995), p. 32.

is with this in mind that the extraordinary textural capacity of poetic realist decor can best be articulated - as a set design whose very mutability and performativity set it aside from the architecturally and visually anonymous design schemes of the majority of 1930s French cinema and initiated a powerful reciprocity between milieu and individual. Max Douy once summed up Trauner's *modus operandi* as a 'harmonieuse fusion de la fidélité réaliste avec le bonheur d'inventer'.<sup>9</sup> It stands as an apt rejoinder not just for Trauner, but also for the most successful design practices of this period, in which personal temperament fused with a feel for the authentic to create a congruous and consonant whole. Harmony, truthfulness and invention - three recurring values throughout this study, and throughout this extraordinary era of cinema.

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<sup>9</sup> Jean-Pierre Berthomé, 'Entretien avec Max Douy (1)' *Positif*, 244-5 (July-August 1981), pp. 2-12 (p. 2).

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## Filmography

Included in the credit list is director, set designers and director of photography. Where a name is omitted, no credit could be traced.

### Principal corpus of French films studied

#### 1930

*L'Age d'or* dir. Luis Buñuel, dec. Pierre Schildknecht, ph. Albert Duverger

*Sous les toits de Paris* dir. René Clair, dec. Lazare Meerson, ph. Georges Périnal and Georges Raulet

*Paris la Nuit* dir. Henri Diamant-Berger, ph. Maurice Desfassiaux

*La Petite Lise* dir. Jean Grémillon, dec. Guy de Gastyne, ph. Jean Bachelet, René Colas

#### 1931

*Faubourg Montmartre* dir. Raymond Bernard, dec. Jean Perrier, ph. Victor Armenise

*Marius* dir. Alexander Korda and Marcel Pagnol, dec. Alfred Junge and Zoltan Korda, ph. Ted Pahle

*A nous la liberté* dir. René Clair, dec. Lazare Meerson, ph. Georges Périnal, Georges Raulet

*La Chienne* dir. Jean Renoir, dec. Gabriel Scognamillo, ph. Théodore Sparkuhl, Roger Hubert

#### 1932

*Quatorze juillet* dir. René Clair, dec. Lazare Meerson, ph. Georges Périnal, Louis Page

*Boudu sauvé des eaux* dir. Jean Renoir, dec. Hugues Laurent and Jean Castanier, ph. Marcel Lucien, Georges Asselin

*Fantômas* dir. Paul Fejos, dec. Gabriel Scognamillo, ph. Roger Hubert, Peverall Marley

*Mirages de Paris* dir. Fedor Ozep, dec. by Lucien Aguetand, André Andrejew, ph. Jean Bachelet, Henri Barreyre

*La Nuit du carrefour* dir. Jean Renoir, dec. William Aguet, Jean Castanier, ph. Marcel Lucien, Georges Asselin

#### 1933

*La Maternelle* dir. Marie Epstein & Jean Benoit-Lévy, dec. Robert Bassi, ph. Georges Asselin

*Dans les rues* dir. Victor Trivas, dec. André Andrejew ph. Rudi Maté, Louis Néé  
*Le Grand jeu* dir. Jacques Feyder, dec. Lazare Meerson, dir. Harry Stradling, Maurice Foster

### 1934

*L'Atalante* dir. Jean Vigo, dec. Francis Jourdain, ph. Boris Kaufman, Louis Berger, Jean-Paul Alphen  
*La Crise est finie* dir. Robert Siodmak, dec. René Renoux, ph. Eugen Schüfftan  
*Jeunesse* dir. Georges Lacombe, dec. Pierre Schild, ph. Harry Stradling, Roger Forster  
*Pension Mimosas* dir. Jacques Feyder, dec. Lazare Meerson, ph. Roger Hubert

### 1935

*La Kermesse héroïque* dir. Jacques Feyder, dec. Lazare Meerson (assisted by Alexandre Trauner and Georges Wakhévitch), ph. Harry Stradling, Louis Page, André Thomas  
*Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* dir. Jean Renoir, dec. Jean Castanier (assisted by Robert Gys), ph. Jean Bachelet  
*La Bandera* dir. Julien Duvivier, dec. Jacques Krauss, ph. Jules Krüger, Marc Fossard  
*Crime et châtiment* dir. Pierre Chenal, dec. Aimé Bazin, ph. Joseph-Louis Mundwiller  
*Princesse Tam Tam* dir. Edmond T. Gréville, dec. Lazare Meerson and Pierre Schild, ph. Georges Benoît

### 1936

*Jenny*, dir. Marcel Carné, dec. Jean d'Eaubonne, ph. Roger Hubert  
*Une Partie de campagne* dir. Jean Renoir, dec. Robert Gys (uncredited), ph. Jean Bourgoïn, Claude Renoir  
*Les Bas-fonds* dir. Jean Renoir, dec. Eugène Lourié and Hugues Laurent, ph. Fédote Bourgassoff, Jacques Mercanton, Jean Bachelet,  
*La Belle équipe* dir. Julien Duvivier, dec. Jacques Krauss, ph. Jules Krüger, Marc Fossard  
*Ménilmontant* dir. René Guissart, dec. René Renoux, ph. Charles Van Enger, Marius Raichi

### 1937

*L'Alibi* dir. Pierre Chenal, dec. Serge Pimenoff and Eugène Lourié, ph. Ted Pahle, Jacques Mercanton  
*Drôle de drame* dir. Marcel Carné, dec. Alexandre Trauner, ph. Eugen Schüfftan, Louis Page, Henri Alekan



*Gueule d'amour* dir. Jean Grémillon, dec. Otto Hünke, ph. Günther Rittau  
*Un Carnet de bal* dir. Julien Duvivier, dec. Serge Pimenoff, Jean Douarinou and Paul Colin, ph. Michel Kelber, Philippe Agostini, Pierre Levent  
*Mollenard* dir. Robert Siodmak, dec. Alexandre Trauner, ph. Eugen Schüfftan, Henri Alekan  
*La Grande illusion* dir. Jean Renoir, dec. Eugène Lourié, ph. Christian Matras, Claude Renoir, Yvan Bourgoïn, Ernest Bourreaud  
*Pépé le Moko* dir. Julien Duvivier, dec. Jacques Krauss, ph. Jules Kruger, Marc Fossard

### 1938

*Carrefour* dir. Curtis Bernhardt, dec. Jacques d'Eaubonne and Raymond Gabutti, ph. Léonce-Henri Burel, Henri Tiquet, Georges Régnier  
*La Maison du maltais* dir. Pierre Chenal, dec. Georges Wakhévitch and Maurice Colasson, ph. Curt Courant, André Bac, Maurice Pecqueux  
*La Bête humaine* dir. Jean Renoir, dec. Eugène Lourié, ph. Curt Courant, Claude Renoir, Jacques Natteau  
*Le Quai des brumes* dir. Marcel Carné, dec. Alexandre Trauner, ph. Eugen Schüfftan, Louis Page, Marc Fossard, Henri Alekan  
*Hôtel du Nord* dir. Marcel Carné, dec. Alexandre Trauner, ph. Armand Thirard, Louis Née  
*La Fin du jour* dir. Julien Duvivier, dec. Jacques Krauss, ph. Christian Matras, Armand Thirard, Robert Juillard, Ernest Bourreaud

### 1939

*La Charrette fantôme* dir. Julien Duvivier, dec. Jacques Krauss and André Trébuchet, ph. Jules Krüger, Lucien Joulin  
*Circonstances atténuantes* dir. Jean Boyer, dec. Jacques Colombier, ph. Victor Arménise, René Ribault  
*Le Jour se lève* dir. Marcel Carné, dec. Alexandre Trauner, ph. Curt Courant, Philippe Agostini, André Bac  
*Pièges* dir. Robert Siodmak, dec. Georges Wakhévitch and Maurice Colasson, ph. Michel Kelber, Jacques Mercanton, Marcel Fradetel  
*Le Dernier tournant* dir. Pierre Chenal, dec. Georges Wakhévitch and Maurice Colasson, ph. Claude Renoir, Christian Matras.

### 1941

*Remorques* dir. Jean Grémillon, dec. Alexandre Trauner, ph. Armand Thirard, Louis Née

**1942**

*L'Assassin habite au 21* dir. Henri-Georges Clouzot, dec. André Andrejew, ph. Armand Thirard

*Les Visiteurs du soir* dir. Marcel Carné, dec. Alexandre Trauner, Georges Wakhévitch, ph. Roger Hubert

**1945**

*Les Enfants du paradis* dir. Marcel Carné, dec. Alexandre Trauner, ph. Roger Hubert

**1946**

*Les Portes de la nuit* dir. Marcel Carné, dec. Alexandre Trauner, ph. Philippe Agostini

**Other films cited**

*Les Victimes de l'alcoolisme* (1902) dir. Ferdinand Zecca.

*Fantômas* (1913-4) dir. Louis Feuillade

*Les Vampires* (1915) dir. Louis Feuillade, dec. Garnier, ph. Manichoux

*Intolerance* (1916), dir. D. W. Griffith, dec. R. Willis Wales, Frank Wortman, ph. Billy Bitzer, Karl Brown

*Broken Blossoms* (1919) dir. D.W. Griffith, dec. Charles E Baker, ph. Billy Bitzer

*Das Kabinett des Doktors Caligari* (1919) dir. Robert Weine, dec. Walter Reimann, Walter Röhrig, Hermann Warm, ph. Willy Hameister

*L'Appel du Sang* (1920) dir. Louis Mercanton

*L'Homme du Large* (1920) dir. Marcel L'Herbier, dec. Claude Autant-Lara

*Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (1920) dir. Paul Wegener, dec. Hans Poelzig, ph. Karl Freund

*Fièvre* (1921) dir. Louis Delluc, dec. Bécan, ph. Lucas Gibory

*La Femme de nulle part* (1922) dir. Louis Delluc, dec. Francis Jourdain, ph. Lucas Gibory

*Jocelyn* (1922) dir. Léon Poirier, ph. Jean Letort

*Robin Hood* (1922) dir. Allan Dwan, dec. Edward M. Langley, Irvin J. Martin, ph. Arthur Edeson

*Raskolnikoff* (1923) dir. Robert Wiene, dec. André Andrejew, ph. Willy Godberger

*Rosita* (1923) dir. Ernst Lubitsch, Raoul Walsh, dec. Sven Gade, William Cameron Menzies, ph. Charles Rosher

*La Fille de l'eau* (1924) dir. Jean Renoir, dec. Jean Renoir, ph. Jean Bachelet, Alphonse Gibory

*L'Inhumaine* (1924) dir. Marcel L'Herbier, dec. Fernand Léger, Albert Cavalcanti, Claude Autant-Lara, Robert Mallet-Stevens, ph. Georges Specht

*Der Letzte Mann* (1924), dir. F.W. Murnau, dec. Robert Herlth, Walter Röhrig, ph. Karl Freund

*Ben Hur* (1925) dir. Fred Niblo, dec. Horace Jackson, Ferdinand Pinney Earle, ph. Karl Struss, Clyde de Vinna

*La Brière* (1925) dir. Léon Poirier, ph. Georges Specht

*Feu Mathias Pascal* (1925) dir. Marcel L'Herbier, dec. Lazare Meerson, Alberto Cavalcanti, Erik Aëas, ph. Jimmy Berliet, F. Bourgassof, René Guichard, John Letort, Nicholas Roudakoff

*Gribiche* (1925) dir. Jacques Feyder, dec. Lazare Meerson

*Metropolis* (1926) dir. Fritz Lang, dec. Otto Hünke, Erich Kettelhut, Karl Vollbrecht, ph. Karl Freund, Günther Rittau

*Paris* (1926) dir. Edmund Goulding, dec. Cedric Gibbons, ph. John Arnold

*Berlin, Symphony of a City* (1927) dir. Walter Ruttmann, ph. Reimar Kuntze, Robert Baberske, Laszlo Schäffer

*Sunrise* (1927) dir. F.W. Murnau, dec. Rochus Gliese, ph. Charles Rosher

*Un Chien andalou* (1928) dir. Luis Buñuel, dec. Pierre Schildknecht, ph. Albert Duverger

*The Docks of New York* (1928) dir. Joseph von Sternberg, dec. Hans Drier, ph. Harold Rossen

*A Man with a Movie Camera* (1928), dir. Dziga Vertov, ph. Mikhail Kaufman

*La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) dir. Carl Dreyer, dec. Hermann Warm, Jean Hugo, ph. Rudolph Maté

*Petite marchande d'allumettes* (1928) dir. Jean Renoir, Jean Tédesco, dec. Erik Aëas, ph. Jean Bachelet

*City Girl* (1929) dir. F.W. Murnau, dec. Harry Oliver, ph. Ernest Palmer

*Nogent, Eldorado du dimanche* (1929) dir. Marcel Carné

*The Blue Angel* (1930) dir. Josef Von Sternberg, dec. Otto Hünke, Emil Hasler, ph. Günther Rittau, Hans Schneeberger

*A propos de Nice* (1930) dir. Jean Vigo, ph. Boris Kaufman

*Le Sang d'un poète* (1930) dir. Jean Cocteau, dec. Jean Gabriel d'Aubonne, ph. Georges Périnal

*Coeur de lilas* (1931) dir. Anatole Litvak, dec. Serge Pimenoff, ph. Curt Courant

*M* (1931) dir. Fritz Lang, dec. Emil Hasler, Karl Vollbrecht, ph. Fritz Arno Wagner

*Svengali* (1931) dir. Archie Mayo, dec. Anton Grot, ph. Barney McGill

*L'Assommoir* (1933), dir. Gaston Roudès

*Zero de conduite* (1933) dir. Jean Vigo, dec. Henri Storck, ph. Boris Kaufman

*La Rue sans nom* (1934) dir. Pierre Chenal, dec. Roland Quignon, ph. Albert Duverger, Joseph-Louis Mundwiler

*Merlusse* (1935) dir. Marcel Pagnol

*César* (1936) dir. Marcel Pagnol, dec. Marius Brouquier, ph. Willy

*Things to Come* (1936) dir. William Cameron Menzies, dec. Vincent Korda, ph. Georges Périnal

*La Femme du boulanger* (1938) dir. Marcel Pagnol, ph. Georges Benoit, R. Lendruz, N. Daries

*Gone With the Wind* (1939) dir. Victor Fleming, dec. William Cameron Menzies, ph. Ernest Haller

*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) dir. Frank Capra, dec. Lionel Banks, ph. Joseph Walker

*Menaces* (1940) dir. Edmond T. Gréville, dec. Jaquelux, ph. Alain Douarinou, Nicolas Hayer, Otto Heller, André Thomas

*Citizen Kane* (1941) dir. Orson Welles, dec. Van Nest Polgase, ph. Gregg Toland

*Suspicion* (1941) dir. Alfred Hitchcock, dec. Van Nest Polgase, ph. Harry Stradling

*Swamp Water* (1941) dir. Jean Renoir, dec. Richard Day, Joseph C Wright, ph. J Peverell Marley

*Casablanca* (1942) dir. Michael Curtiz, dec. Carl Jules Weyl, ph. Arthur Edeson

*Cat People* (1942) dir. Jacques Tourneur, dec. Carlo Leva, ph. Erico Menczer

*The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) dir. Orson Welles, dec. Mark-Lee Kirk, ph. Stanley Cortez

*Rome Open City* (1945) dir. Roberto Rossellini, dec. Rosario Megna, ph. Ubaldo Arata

*La Bataille du Rail* (1945) dir. René Clément, ph. Henri Alekan

*Scarlet Street* (1945) dir. Fritz Lang, dec. Alexander Golitzen, ph. Milton Krasner

*The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) dir. William Wyler, dec. Perry Ferguson, George Jenkins, ph. Gregg Toland

*It's A Wonderful Life* (1946) dir. Frank Capra, dec. Jack Okey, ph. Joseph Walker

*The Killers* (1946) dir. Robert Siodmak, dec. Jack Otterson, ph. Woody Bredell

*A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) dir. Michael Powell, dec. Alfred Junge, ph. Jack Cardiff

*The Spiral Staircase* (1946) dir. Robert Siodmak, dec. Albert S. D'Agostino, Jack Okey, ph. Nicholas Musuraca

*The Big Clock* (1947) dir. John Farrow, dec. Hans Dreier, Roland Anderson, Albert Nozaki, ph. John Seitz

*Germany Year Zero* (1947), dir. Roberto Rossellini, dec. Piero Filippone, ph. Robert Juillard

*Out of the Past* (1947) dir. Jacques Tourneur, dec. Albert S D'Agostino, Jack Okey, ph. Nick Musuraca

*Key Largo* (1948) dir. John Huston, dec. Leo K. Kuter, ph. Karl Freund

*Rome Open City* (1948) dir. Michael Curtiz, dec. Anton Grot, ph. Elwood Bredell

*Secret beyond the door...* (1948) dir. Fritz Lang, dec. Max Parker, ph. Stanley Cortez

*The Third Man* (1949) dir. Carol Reed, dec. Vincent Korda, ph. Robert Krasker

*The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) dir. John Huston, dec. William Cruise, ph. Hanania Baer

*Night and the City* (1950) dir. Jules Dassin, dec. C. P. Norman, ph. Max Greene

*The River* (1951) dir. Jean Renoir, dec. Eugène Lourié, Bansi Chandra Gupta, ph. Claude Renoir

*Royal Wedding* (1951) dir. Stanley Donen, dec. Cedric Gibbons, Jack Martin Smith, ph. Robert Planck

*Singin' in the Rain* (1952) dir. Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, dec. Randall Duell, Cedric Gibbons, ph. Harold Rossen

*Rear Window* (1954) dir. Alfred Hitchcock, dec. Hal Pereira, Joseph McMillan Johnson, ph. Robert Burks

*French Can-Can* (1955) dir. Jean Renoir, dec. Max Douy, ph. Michel Kelber

*The Land of the Pharaohs* (1955) dir. Howard Hawks, dec. Alexandre Trauner, ph. Lee Garmes, Russell Harlan

*Night of the Hunter* (1955) dir. Charles Laughton, dec. Hilyard M. Brown, ph. Stanley Cortez

*Giant* (1956) dir. George Stevens, dec. Boris Leven, ph. William C. Mellor, Edwin DuPar

*The Ten Commandments* (1956) dir. Cecil B. de Mille, dec. Hal Pereira, Walter H. Tyler, Albert Nozaki, ph. Loyal Griggs

*La Traversée de Paris* (1956), dir. Claude Autant-Lara, dec. Max Douy, ph. Jacques Natteau

*Vertigo* (1958) dir. Alfred Hitchcock, dec. Henry Bumstead, Hal Pereira, ph. Robert Burks

*The Apartment* (1960) dir. Billy Wilder, dec. Alexandre Trauner, ph. Joseph LaShelle

*Psycho* (1960) dir. Alfred Hitchcock, dec. Robert Clatworthy, Joseph Hurley, ph. John L. Russell

*West Side Story* (1961) dir. Robert Wise, Jerome Robbins, dec. Boris Leven, ph. Daniel L. Fapp

*Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) dir. David Lean, dec. John Box, ph. Freddie Young

*The Birds* (1963) dir. Alfred Hitchcock, dec. Robert Boyle, ph. Robert Burks

*Cleopatra* (1963) dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz, dec. John deCuir, Jack Martin Smith, Hilyard M. Brown, ph. Leon Shamroy

*Battle of Algiers* (1965) dir. Gillo Pontecorvo, dec. Sergio Canevari, ph. Marcello Gatti

*Sleuth* (1972) dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz, ph. Oswald Morris

*All the President's Men* (1976) dir. Alan J. Pakula, dec. George Jenkins, ph. Gordon Willis

*Taxi Driver* (1976) dir. Martin Scorsese, dec. Charles Rosen, ph. Michael Chapman

*Annie Hall* (1977) dir. Woody Allen, dec. Mel Bourne, ph. Gordon Willis

*Manhattan* (1979) dir. Woody Allen, dec. Mel Bourne, ph. Gordon Willis

*The Warriors* (1979) dir. Walter Hill, dec. Don Swanagan, Robert Wightman, ph. Andrew Laszlo

*Blade Runner* (1982) dir. Ridley Scott, dec. Lawrance G. Paull, ph. Jordan Cronenweth

*Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) dir. Sergio Leone, dec. Carlo Simi, James Singelis, ph. Tonino Delli Colli

*Subway* (1985) dir. Luc Besson, dec. Alexandre Trauner, ph. Carlo Varini

*Hannah and her Sisters* (1986) dir. Woody Allen, dec. Stuart Wurtzel, ph. Carlo di Palma

*Batman* (1989) dir. Tim Burton, dec. Anton Furst, ph. Roger Pratt

*Marius et Jeannette* (1997) dir. Robert Guédiguian, dec. Karim Hamzaoui, ph. Bernard Cavalié

*Star Wars : Episode I : The Phantom Menace* (1999) dir. George Lucas, dec. Gavin Bocquet, ph. David Tattersall

*Gladiator* (2000) dir. Ridley Scott, dec. Arthur Max, ph. John Mathieon

*Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001) dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet, dec. Aline Bonetto, ph. Bruno Delbonnel

## Miscellaneous

*Marcel Carné, ou si le destin savoir voir* (1978) dir. Claude-Jean Philippe

*Atmosphère* (1985) dir. Yann Piquer, Philippe Dorison

*Carné, vous avez dit Carné?* (1994) dir. Jean-Denis Bonan

## Appendix 1

### Décors

Quelque part en plein air  
une rue est tracée  
une façade dressée

A son heure  
comme les acteurs  
arrivera le soleil levant

Trauner lui a donné rendez-vous  
un peu au-dessus du toit  
exactement  
et l'opérateur l'attend  
quand il surgira  
maquillé en soleil couchant  
le paysage se mettra en marche  
et les personnages vivront dedans  
leur destin animé  
pour l'instant

Et bientôt ce sera le même désert qu'avant  
Mais bientôt aussi  
ce sera peut-être en Grèce les terrasses d'un palais  
comme c'était à Belle Ile en mer  
la cour d'une prison d'enfants  
ou bien les oubliettes d'un château en Auvergne

Décors de Trauner  
architecture imaginaire  
de rêves de platras de lumière et de vent  
Décors de Trauner  
si beaux et si vivants.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Prévert, repr. in *Positif*, 223 (1979), p. 2.

## Appendix 2

The following overview is by no means definitive, offering instead a list of the most renowned and celebrated efforts by the individual designer. Much of this information has been gleaned from the Internet Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)).

### Jacques Krauss

1900-1957 (born in France)

<i>Élisa</i>	(1957)
<i>Le Fils de Caroline chérie</i>	(1955)
<i>Caroline chérie</i>	(1950)
<i>Et moi j'te dis qu'elle t'a fait de l'oeil</i>	(1950)
<i>Les Aventures de Casanova</i>	(1946)
<i>Le Fugitif</i>	(1946)
<i>Sylvie et le fantôme</i>	(1945)
<i>La Fiancée des ténèbres</i>	(1945)
<i>Le Voyageur sans bagages</i>	(1944)
<i>Douce</i>	(1943)
<i>Monsieur La Souris</i>	(1942)
<i>Le Mariage de chiffon</i>	(1942)
<i>La Charrette fantôme</i>	(1939)
<i>La Fin du jour</i>	(1939)
<i>Accord final</i>	(1938)
<i>Entrée des artistes</i>	(1938)
<i>Pépé le Moko</i>	(1937)
<i>La Belle équipe</i>	(1936)
<i>La Bandera</i>	(1935)
<i>Monsieur Sans-Gêne</i>	(1935)

### Eugène Lourié

1903-1991 (Russia)

<i>Bronco Billy</i>	(1980)
<i>The Royal Hunt of the Sun</i>	(1969)
<i>Custer of the West</i>	(1967)
<i>Bikini Paradise</i>	(1965)
<i>Battle of the Bulge</i>	(1965)
<i>The Strangler</i>	(1964)
<i>Shock Corridor</i>	(1963)
<i>Confessions of an Opium Eater</i>	(1962)
<i>So This Is Paris</i>	(1954)



<i>Limelight</i>	(1952)
<i>The River</i>	(1951)
<i>A Woman's Vengeance</i>	(1948)
<i>Song of Scheherazade</i>	(1947)
<i>The Long Night</i>	(1947)
<i>The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry</i>	(1945)
<i>Fausse alerte</i>	(1945)
<i>The House of Fear</i>	(1945)
<i>The Diary of a Chambermaid</i>	(1946)
<i>The Southerner</i>	(1945)
<i>This Love of Ours</i>	(1945)
<i>In Society</i>	(1944)
<i>Three Russian Girls</i>	(1944)
<i>The Impostor</i>	(1944)
<i>Sahara</i>	(1943)
<i>L'Or du Cristobal</i>	(1940)
<i>Sans lendemain</i>	(1939)
<i>La Règle du jeu</i>	(1939)
<i>La Bête humaine</i>	(1938)
<i>Les Nouveaux riches</i>	(1938)
<i>La Tragédie impériale</i>	(1938)
<i>Werther</i>	(1938)
<i>L'Affaire Lafarge</i>	(1937)
<i>La Grande illusion</i>	(1937)
<i>Le Messager</i>	(1937)
<i>Ramuntcho</i>	(1937)
<i>L'Alibi</i>	(1937)
<i>Les Bas-fonds</i>	(1936)
<i>Le Grand refrain</i>	(1936)
<i>Aventure à Paris</i>	(1936)
<i>Sous les yeux d'occident</i>	(1936)
<i>La Petite sauvage</i>	(1935)
<i>Les Yeux noirs</i>	(1935)
<i>Crime et châiment</i>	(1935)
<i>Le Bossu</i>	(1934)
<i>La Porteuse de pain</i>	(1934)
<i>Madame Bovary</i>	(1933)

## Lazare Meerson

1900-1938 (Russia)

<i>The Citadel</i>	(1938)
<i>South Riding</i>	(1938)
<i>The Divorce of Lady X</i>	(1938)
<i>Return of the Scarlet Pimpernel</i>	(1938)
<i>Knight Without Armour</i>	(1937)
<i>Fire Over England</i>	(1937)

<i>As You Like It</i>	(1936)
<i>Les Beaux jours</i>	(1935)
<i>Pension Mimosas</i>	(1935)
<i>La Kermesse héroïque</i>	(1935)
<i>Princesse Tam Tam</i>	(1935)
<i>Amok</i>	(1934)
<i>End of the World</i>	(1934)
<i>Le Grand jeu</i>	(1934)
<i>Justin de Marseille</i>	(1934)
<i>Lac aux dames</i>	(1934)
<i>Primerose</i>	(1933)
<i>Quatorze juillet</i>	(1932)
<i>Les Cinq gentlemen maudits</i>	(1931)
<i>A nous la liberté</i>	(1931)
<i>Le Million</i>	(1931)
<i>La Fin du monde</i>	(1931)
<i>Romance sentimentale</i>	(1930)
<i>Sous les toits de Paris</i>	(1930)
<i>Les Nouveaux messieurs</i>	(1929)
<i>L'Argent</i>	(1929)
<i>Les Deux timides</i>	(1928)
<i>Un chapeau de paille d'Italie</i>	(1927)
<i>Carmen</i>	(1926)
<i>Feu Mathias Pascal</i>	(1925)

## Alexandre Trauner

1906-1993 (Hungary)

<i>The Rainbow Thief</i>	(1990)
<i>Comédie d'amour</i>	(1989)
<i>Reunion</i>	(1989)
<i>La Nuit Bengali</i>	(1988)
<i>'Round Midnight</i>	(1986)
<i>Harem</i>	(1985)
<i>Subway</i>	(1985)
<i>Vive les femmes!</i>	(1984)
<i>Tchao, pantin!</i>	(1983)
<i>La Truite</i>	(1982)
<i>Coup de torchon</i>	(1981)
<i>Don Giovanni</i>	(1979)
<i>Fedora</i>	(1978)
<i>Monsieur Klein</i>	(1976)
<i>The Man Who Would Be King</i>	(1975)
<i>Story of a Love Story</i>	(1973)
<i>Les Mariés de l'an II</i>	(1971)
<i>Promise at Dawn</i>	(1970)
<i>The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes</i>	(1970)

<i>Up Tight!</i>	(1968)
<i>A Flea in Her Ear</i>	(1968)
<i>The Night of the General</i>	(1966)
<i>How to Steal a Million</i>	(1966)
<i>Kiss Me, Stupid</i>	(1964)
<i>Behold a Pale Horse</i>	(1964)
<i>Irma la Douce</i>	(1963)
<i>One, Two, Three</i>	(1961)
<i>Paris Blues</i>	(1961)
<i>Apartment, The</i>	(1960)
<i>Le Secret du Chevalier d'Éon</i>	(1959)
<i>Sois belle et tais-toi</i>	(1958)
<i>The Happy Road</i>	(1957)
<i>Witness for the Prosecution</i>	(1957)
<i>Love in the Afternoon</i>	(1957)
<i>En effeuillant la marguerite</i>	(1956)
<i>La Lumière d'en face</i>	(1955)
<i>L'Amant de lady Chatterley</i>	(1955)
<i>Du rififi chez les hommes</i>	(1955)
<i>Land of the Pharaohs</i>	(1955)
<i>The Tragedy of Othello: The Moor of Venice</i>	(1952)
<i>Juliette ou la clé des songes</i>	(1950)
<i>Miracles n'ont lieu qu'une fois</i>	(1950)
<i>Manèges</i>	(1949)
<i>La Marie du port</i>	(1949)
<i>Voyage surprise</i>	(1947)
<i>Les Portes de la nuit</i>	(1946)
<i>Les Enfants du paradis</i>	(1945)
<i>Lumière d'été</i>	(1943)
<i>Les Visiteurs du soir</i>	(1942)
<i>Remorques</i>	(1941)
<i>Le Jour se lève</i>	(1939)
<i>Hôtel du Nord</i>	(1938)
<i>Entrée des artistes</i>	(1938)
<i>Mollenard</i>	(1938)
<i>Quai des brumes</i>	(1938)
<i>Drôle de drame</i>	(1937)
<i>La Kermesse héroïque</i>	(1935)
<i>Sans famille</i>	(1934)

## Georges Wakhévitch

1907-1984 (Ukraine)

<i>La Tragédie de Carmen</i>	(1983)
<i>Meetings with Remarkable Men</i>	(1979)

<i>Otello</i>	(1973)
<i>La Folie des grandeurs</i>	(1971)
<i>King Lear</i>	(1971)
<i>Mayerling</i>	(1968)
<i>Monnaie de singe</i>	(1965)
<i>Les Fêtes galantes</i>	(1965)
<i>Échappement libre</i>	(1964)
<i>Le Journal d'une femme de chambre</i>	(1964)
<i>Amours célèbres</i>	(1961)
<i>La Femme et le pantin</i>	(1958)
<i>Les Jeux dangereux</i>	(1958)
<i>Paris Holiday</i>	(1958)
<i>Si le roi savait ça</i>	(1956)
<i>El Amor de Don Juan</i>	(1956)
<i>Ali-Baba et les quarante voleurs</i>	(1954)
<i>La Chair et le diable</i>	(1954)
<i>The Beggar's Opera</i>	(1953)
<i>Innocents in Paris</i>	(1952)
<i>Les Plaisirs de Paris</i>	(1952)
<i>Nez de cuir</i>	(1951)
<i>Blaubart</i>	(1951)
<i>Barbe-Bleue</i>	(1951)
<i>The Medium</i>	(1951)
<i>L'Aiguille rouge</i>	(1951)
<i>Miquette et sa mère</i>	(1950)
<i>L'Aigle à deux têtes</i>	(1947)
<i>Dédée d'Anvers</i>	(1947)
<i>Miroir</i>	(1947)
<i>Ruy Blas</i>	(1947)
<i>Danse de mort</i>	(1946)
<i>Mademoiselle X</i>	(1945)
<i>Le Mort ne reçoit plus</i>	(1944)
<i>Béatrice devant le désir</i>	(1944)
<i>L'Eternel retour</i>	(1943)
<i>La Vie de bohème</i>	(1942)
<i>Les Visiteurs du soir</i>	(1942)
<i>Mélodie pour toi</i>	(1942)
<i>Sérénade</i>	(1940)
<i>Pièges</i>	(1939)
<i>Louise</i>	(1939)
<i>Le Dernier tournant</i>	(1939)
<i>Conflit</i>	(1939)
<i>La Marseillaise</i>	(1938)
<i>Prison sans barreaux</i>	(1938)
<i>Le Chanteur de minuit</i>	(1937)
<i>Le Temps des cerises</i>	(1937)
<i>A nous deux, madame la vie</i>	(1936)
<i>L'Homme à l'Hispano</i>	(1933)
<i>Madame Bovary</i>	(1933)